

Leaving the Fold

**A guide
for former
fundamentalists
and others
leaving their
religion**



**Foreword by
Steve Allen**

Marlene Winell, Ph.D.

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Introduction to the 2007 Edition

It's been twelve years since I wrote this book and a lot has happened, both in my life and in the world. For myself, I moved back to the U.S. from Australia in 2000, and am now a single mom with two children. I taught for a while at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where my son went to college. Our nation experienced the turmoil of 9/11 and the subsequent bungling of the Bush administration. I became engaged politically, educating myself about the role of the U.S. in world affairs, and making it the focus of a documentary film. My concerns about fundamentalism have also expanded beyond the personal as I see the great danger it poses to a democracy which relies on a thinking public—not a population waiting for the rapture, passively supporting violence as a sign of the end times, or trying to impose legalism and theocracy.

Now based in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have also continued my private consulting and educational work, specializing in Relationship Enhancement for couples and consulting with people recovering from religious indoctrination. I offer weekend workshops for people to come together and get group support for the changes they are choosing in their lives. These “Release and Reclaim” programs are for letting go of old beliefs and building self-chosen lives of meaning and joy here and now. Recovery coaching and ongoing web-based group support is also described at my website, journeyfree.org.

A sequel to “Leaving the Fold” will encompass new areas, including Religious Trauma Syndrome, or RTS. Meanwhile, I'd like to share with you the text from a talk I gave in July, 2006:

Dear Born-again Christian,

I know what you're going through. Really I do; I've been there. You are facing what all of us face—several things that are incredibly uncomfortable about being human.

First of all, we're all going to die. This is the big kicker, actually. We can't seem to avoid it, although people use many ingenious methods to fight it. Yet death is there and it throws our lives into relief.

It raises the question of meaning. Is life merely dust to dust, ashes to ashes? If not, then what?

I'll grant you that your belief system gives you hope for eternal life. It begs the question of death. It also hands you a system of meaning. It explains everything; it gives you answers; it helps you sleep at night.

We also share the dilemma of being responsible for our own lives. This is great freedom and also a burden. I can understand giving it over to authorities who seem to know best.

Finally, we all face the fact of being alone. No matter who we know or how much time we spend with others, we are ultimately alone. This is not easy. I can see how an exclusive church family helps and the promised intimacy with Jesus appeals. Ordinary people are not entirely reliable, are they? And many of our families of origin were disappointing if not damaging.

Overall, it's natural to want security and certainty. We cannot predict or control the future.

But, dear Christian, what if these comforts cause you separation and limitation? What if in looking to life hereafter, you miss this one? What if clinging to your group of believers, you are disconnected from the rest of the community, and you feel separate from humanity? What if in turning over responsibility for your values and choices, you find yourself on a very narrow path of conformity?

I know you were taught that the narrow road is the one and only correct one. But what if these teachings are only ideas, albeit powerful and held by many? For centuries, another powerful and widely held idea said the earth was flat.

So I'd like to present you with a different core idea and an invitation. May I suggest the idea that there is more than one way, despite the exclusive notions of truth you have learned? More than one way to live, more than one way to know "God"? I invite you to

explore. I invite you to have courage, for that is what we have as humans that makes us grand.

Yes, we will die, but for now we are alive. I invite you to notice the day we have today, the world around us, the breath we breathe, and exult in it. I invite you to join us, the rest of the human race, and the rest of life on the planet as well. We ask you to share with us this journey of uncertainty, ambiguity, joys and sorrows, knowing we are flawed, yet capable—yes capable—of many things; not full of original sin, depraved, weak, dependant, foolish. We are capable of dancing and singing, loving, working, falling down and getting up again, laughing and trudging on, continuing on a life journey that is wide and wonderful, certain only of mystery and surprise.

Please join us, and despite your ultimate individuality, I can guarantee you will feel far from alone. There are many of us relinquishing the illusion of safety, rebuilding and reconnecting, above all connecting deeply with ourselves, learning to trust our own thoughts and feelings. We can support you.

We invite you to let go of right and wrong, good and bad. Join us in the relief of acceptance and the warmth of compassion, where we share our desire to work for justice, express our creativity, and not turn away from what is possible. Join us as we learn to tap into our inner resources of love and wisdom and strength. Let's stop fighting with "sin" and allow our own goodness to permeate our lives, leaving room for imperfection, mistakes, and forgiveness. Let's be good animals, learn to be in our bodies, and experience the sensory richness of life.

We do have options. The way we look at things makes a huge difference. We can see death as a closing phrase of a beautiful sonata. Freedom and responsibility can be parts of an exciting challenge, not a burden. Aloneness can be taken in context, like a wave in an ocean—individual and special but much more—united with others and powerful in the largeness of existence. Meaning might be fluid and a natural outcome, not defined or chased or captured. Perhaps as we embrace and engage with life, meaning

takes care of itself. Perhaps we are co-creators with God, and she is evident among us as we are willing to participate.

Earth is our home, here and now. We are sharing this beautiful and fragile little planet. We need you. Together we can be happy as we make the world a better place for all. Welcome home.

Sincerely yours,

The Great Unwashed (but happily so)

Foreword

Despite the apparent end of the Cold War, the world continues to be a dangerous place partly because fanatics under various banners—political, ethnic, or religious—stridently proclaim the superiority of their beliefs. This new book by psychologist Marlene Winell provides valuable insights into the dangers of certain forms of religious indoctrination and outlines what therapists and victims can do to reclaim a healthier human spirit.

From my work on the public television series *Meeting of Minds* to my books on freedom and thought and religion, I have stressed the need to bring discussions of reason and faith. Thinking and spirituality should not be put in opposition to each other, otherwise claims of inerrancy can easily lead to fanatical efforts at mind control. Much of my energy over the past 50 years has been expended on championing reasoning and science. In my own writings, I have touched on much of the same territory Dr. Winell covers in this book. For that matter, countless volumes have been written on the destructive effects of uncritical acceptance of philosophical claims and the irrational behavior it often leads to.

History, of course, is tragically full of examples where well-intentioned spiritual convictions led directly to suppression of contrary views, oppression, torture, war, and other atrocities, all in the name of what was supposedly holy. Today the human race is forced to react to an increasingly complex and fast-changing world. Often the response is an opposite pull, toward a simpler model—one which seems to offer clear rules, explanations, and assurances for the future, if not on Earth, then in an afterlife. Such systems of belief, of which extreme Christian and Muslim fundamentalism are examples, superimpose structure over the chaos of our times. This book suggests that, by virtue of their simplicity and rigidity, these systems are inherently flawed.

What sets Ms. Winell's book apart is that it takes the further step of examining the issue on a personal level, exploring the ways in which

dogmatic, unquestioning faith can impair the individual's ability to think. Both former believers searching for a new beginning and those just starting to subject their faith to the requirements of simple common sense, if not analytical reason, may find valuable assistance in these pages.

— Steve Allen

Author and entertainer

Preface

I knew I had reached a new stage in my own recovery when I had a surprising dream. For a long time the process of extricating myself from the hold of fundamentalism had meant guilt and fear. At the same time a very urgent part of me was insisting on breaking free to a more expansive way of living.

In my now-cherished dream, I died and found myself in heaven. Surprised to be there, I said "Wait a minute; I don't believe!" I thought there had been some mistake; I'd left the fold a long time ago, after all. Then I had a gradual sense of God's presence. I felt comfortable and welcome. I realized that he liked me-a lot. He explained that people have long misunderstood the criteria for getting into heaven. It has nothing to do with being good and following rules, he said. And it's not a deal you cut-a salvation formula. "Instead," he said, "You're here because you dared to live." That dream was my first deep realization that I was on the right track. Although I had rejected many of my traditional beliefs and worked on developing a new set of values, and even though I felt more consistent and true to myself, I had had lingering doubts: was it to forge my own approach to life? I had been taught that there was one way-the revealed truth-and to believe otherwise was arrogant and risky. My unconscious conflict between safety and integrity had been resolved by an unspoken agreement that if I chose to live in the way I thought best I would have to take the risk of going to hell.

"God's" message in my dream was very different. It confirmed what I have come to believe-that we are here on earth to live life fully. It helped me respect myself, and stop feeling wrong for doing what felt right. I never returned to religion and I don't believe "God" is judging me. When I consider some kind of life-force, I now believe that she/he/it supports me in being who I am. There are no easy answers and life can get tough at times. Yet despite the ambiguity, we all need to plunge ahead and do it anyway. We can find the courage and discover great joy.

My hope is to convey this message of acceptance and courage to you. If you have left a religion that provided all the answers for you and you now want to take more responsibility for your own life, you too can feel blessed to follow your own path. There can be problems and wounds as a result of religious training, but there are strengths to build upon as well.

Introduction

Religion is supposed to be good for you. Yet people get hurt in religious systems, sometimes seriously. I used to think that although damage was done by so-called cults, most religion is essentially benign. It could give you some comfort as a child and teach you some values, but then you grew up and away from it. It wasn't until I looked back on my struggle to grow free of my own indoctrination, and heard the stories of others, that I realized that this kind of emotional and mental damage can be profound.

In conservative Christianity you are told you are unacceptable. You are judged with regard to your relationship to God. Thus you can only be loved positionally, not essentially. And, contrary to any assumed ideal of Christian love, you cannot love others for their essence either. This is the horrible cost of the doctrine of original sin. Recovering from this unloving assumption is perhaps the core task when you leave the fold. It is also a discovery of great joy—to permit unconditional love for yourself and others.

The problem of religious damage has not received much attention, perhaps because Christianity is so much a part of our culture and real criticism is taboo. Just consider what we have done to so-called heretics throughout history. Religious damage may also seem less serious than other recovery issues such as alcoholism or child abuse. And since faith is thought of as a good thing in a world brimming with materialism, selfishness, and violence, many feel strange when complaining of church attendance or growing up in a religious home.

But leaving your faith is not like letting your library card expire or no longer believing in Santa Claus. It can be shattering to realize that your religion is creating problems in your life. Whether you leave abruptly or drift away over a long period of time, you may experience profound sadness and confusion about what to do, think, and believe. You may also feel the rage of betrayal or struggle with persistent depression.

Many people are reluctant to talk about this subject for fear of hurting loved ones, of alienating others, of appearing foolish and self-centered. They sometimes fear divine retribution. I have known therapists who were afraid to work openly with people on these issues because they were concerned they might be labeled anti-religious or anti-God. However, more often, therapists who have not been through the experience themselves do not understand the difficulty of recovering from an authoritarian religion.

Intended Readers

This book is written for those who want to understand and recover from harmful religious indoctrination. It is also intended as useful information for therapists and others seeking understanding of these issues, particularly in relation to fundamentalism.

This book is for you if you are now in some stage of leaving your religion. You may be just beginning to have nagging doubts, a sense of uneasiness about a church you have considered home. The concepts and exercise here can help you understand your feelings and consider alternatives. Nick was one such young man who had become very unhappy with the “one way” attitude in his family’s church, because it made him feel alienated from other people at work. He was learning more about other points of view as he got older. Yet he valued the teachings of Jesus and felt he needed the social life of the church. The prospect of leaving was a disturbing one, but he no longer felt he belonged.

This book is also for you if you have long since left the religion of your childhood and you realize that you are still sorting out its impact. For instance, Sarah had been a devoted Christian growing up, and while she valued many aspects of her faith, she also had learned to attribute all her emotional and family problems to issues of sin and repentance. In midlife, Sarah realized that even though she had broken ties with the church, her nightmares about being evil were related to early messages.

This material is also appropriate if you grew up under pressure to conform to your parents’ religious beliefs but never found these to be personally

meaningful. If you ever tried and never “got it”, you may be suffering from a level of guilt and anxiety that is truly painful. Bob was one who had this experience, partly at a Christian boarding school. He explained that since he never really had a faith to lose, his personal struggle has not been the loss of faith but rather the loss of guilt about not having faith and the loss of desire to have faith.

Conversely, children who grow up in nonreligious families may convert as adults in a search for answers to the questions their parents avoided. This is often an attempt to gain a spiritual community while resolving personal problems. If the new system of belief then fails to meet expectations, bitterness and despair can result. In Corrairie’s case, the tidy world of conservative Christianity seemed to give her the order and sanity she wanted after a chaotic childhood in which she had to do the parenting for the family. However, she also craved love and so was devastated to find that she did not get unconditional acceptance in the church. Corrairie left after only a few years but then battled with a resulting depression for some time after that.

Some people leave a restrictive religious background and move on with their lives without being aware of any issues. Years later however, it might still be important for them to examine the residual effects of indoctrination. Terry was an example of someone who ignored recovery for many years. He realized in his late fifties that he was still angry. He had broken away as an adolescent but never found a way to make peace with his parents or with his God. He resented the guilt he felt over sexuality and the fact that he hadn’t been given full support needed for essential self-worth. Most of all, he was still searching for some kind of spiritual life that wasn’t polluted with childhood imaged of a vengeful and judgmental God.

This book will also be of interest to those of you who have a family member or friend with one of the backgrounds described above. As you relate to people recovering from indoctrination, you will want to understand

the impact of religious training and develop appropriate sensitivity and compassion.

Finally, this book is intended as a resource for the helping professional who wants to be better equipped to work with religious issues. Most therapists are not trained in this area, and clients often are not aware of the relevance to their own mental health. Yet a huge number of psychotherapy clients have had enough harmful religious indoctrination to warrant serious attention.

More generally, this material can be useful to anyone interested in the fundamentalist movement. As a conservative branch of Christianity, fundamentalism includes a growing number of believers worldwide. They are a very serious group of people, convinced of their world view and sincere about evangelizing. They are not crazy or stupid. They believe fervently in their religion and the values they want upheld in society. As a system of thought and a political force, fundamentalism needs to be understood. This book attempts to explain some of the key psychological and social dynamics that motivate its adherents.

I decided to concentrate on Christian fundamentalism because it has been my own personal experience, my clinical work, and my area of research. However, most of the central issues of psychological damage and recovery are true for other dogmatic religions as well, particularly Bible-based churches. Many groups with cult-like qualities also share the dangers described here. In working with clients in therapy, I have found this material relevant to former Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Emissaries of Divine Light, Scientologists, and others.

In addition to the major fundamentalist denominations, certain issues here can apply to more moderate and liberal churches as well. Everything depends on the specifics of teaching and approach, and can vary with time, personalities, and situation. You yourself will need to assess what part of this book applies to which part of your experience. Some people have also

found that certain issues of group pressure and mind control can apply to nonreligious social and political groups and thus shed light on difficulties with those organizations.

I should also say that this book is not for those who are comfortable and content with their religion, nor for those who are seeking reassurance and confirmation of beliefs and practices they have begun to question. It does not offer a new way of reading the Bible or interpreting Christianity. Rather, the intent is to help those who are leaving the fold or those who want to know more about this process. Therefore, the book does not contain theological arguments, although the a number of books provide critiques of fundamentalism.

Writing this Book

My faith was central to my life for many years. In answer to the challenge “But were you ever really born again?” there is no doubt in my mind that my Christian experience was genuine. The benefits were real, especially as an adolescent. Later the cost became too great. Leaving the fold was then a long and wrenching process which tore at the fabric of my existence. The changes I went through created confusion, fear, anger, and grief. I had to find out who I was and redefine reality. Previously, my religion had done everything for me. “Losing” God was like losing parents. Family and friends were never the same afterwards, and I no longer had a readily available community. The magnitude of the reconstruction only dawned on my some ten years later. Every aspect of my life had to be reexamined, healed, and redesigned. Feeling like a small child, I had to be born again in a very different way and learn to be a grown-up in this world. I think it would have been a lot easier if I had known then what I know now.

Writing this book began several years ago in an effort to understand my own development. When I began, I had no idea other people would relate to my journey or that I would ever write a book. Sitting at my typewriter one day, I began to describe the way I though fundamentalism had affected my life. That became twelve pages. When I shared it with others, I was

surprised at how many of the issues resonated for them, including those in a variety of other belief systems.

Then, as I worked with clients in my private practice, I began listening more and more to what people had to say about religion and spirituality in their lives. Certain themes emerged over and over again: People from a wide variety of religious groups were struggling with self-esteem and needed to reclaim the ability to think for themselves, to understand and accept their own feelings, and to take more responsibility for their own lives. As I worked with these clients, I also found that learning to care for the inner child was an immediate and powerful route to health. My practice expanded and became fascinating as I began getting referrals of other people with religious issues. Therapy groups proved especially productive; participants shared their stories with each other and supported each other's recovery.

Eventually, I wrote a professional paper that I presented at an annual conference of the American Psychological Association. The session was well-attended, and many there remarked that this "shattered faith syndrome" had received little attention in psychology. I remember my surprise when I stood in the hotel elevator holding my paper and a stranger noticed the title and gave me his card, requesting a copy. This kind of quick reaction has occurred again and again, reconfirming my desire to press on with this effort.

In time, I decided to investigate further and proceeded to interview people from a variety of religious backgrounds. There is enough to say about rigid religion to fill several books, so I decided to concentrate on fundamentalism, and trust the reader to make appropriate connections.

Background and Definitions

Although this book is about understanding and rebuilding, and not about emotional fault-finding, I think that institutions can take on a life of their own and that individuals do get used and hurt. There is much that is dangerous about controlling systems that takes away that which is most

precious about human beings. This book is not anti-God, anti-church, or anti-spirituality, but it is anti-dogma. It is about problems with rigid religions—those that hold their tenets to be more important than people to the point where believers can be harmed.

A dogmatic religion is one that does not truly honor the thoughts and feelings of the individual. It is also one that is static, without room for development. Doubt is considered sinful, and contradicting information is screened out. The divine and sacred are seen as derived from outside, with no recognition afforded to a person's inner resources of wisdom, strength, and love. A rigid religion fosters dependency on the external authorities of "God" (as defined by the religion), scripture, and the church leaders for guidance in truth. Ultimately, a rigid religion erodes the natural contentment and confidence with which every child begins life and which every healthy being needs.

In contrast, a more moderate religious group often features a respect for individual differences around doctrine, religious practice, and lifestyle. There is tolerance for, and often interest in, learning from other faiths. In a healthy religious community people have their own self-esteem and support each other's full development. A group can be cohesive while open and connected to the wider world.

Christian fundamentalism is a blanket term that encompasses a variety of conservative sects (evangelicals, charismatics, Pentecostals), all of which take the Bible as the literal truth and require followers to accept Jesus as their personal savior. A central doctrine is that of original sin, which influences the rest of the belief system. God and Satan, along with angels and demons, are believed to be objective forces battling for human souls. The Second Coming of Christ is considered to be imminent, resulting in a final judgment of all humankind when individuals will be sent to heaven or hell for eternity.

Historically, fundamentalism was a reaction to modernist trends in theology and society. The rallying cry was for a return to the supposed "timeless

truths of old”, revealed in the Bible by God *for all time*. There was a pervasive fear the modernists and liberals were watering down the Christian message, making it relevant to the times, and thereby destroying the integrity of the faith. To clarify what they considered the absolutes of genuine Christianity, the leaders of this movement made a list of “fundamentals” in a series of booklets published in the United States from 1910 to 1915. The term *fundamentalism* is derived from these writings about traditional doctrines: the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the deity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, as well as other beliefs that fundamentalists hold dear.

Beyond these core beliefs, fundamentalist churches vary in theology and degree of rigidity. In general, the attitude is antihumanistic; the impulses and achievements of mere humans are seen as dangerously anti-God, making Scripture itself appear to be the deity worshipped.

The mindset of fundamentalism is as much a part of its definition as its theology. One chief characteristic is a mood of militant opposition to secular culture, liberal theology, higher criticism, and scientific views that challenge the Bible. Consequently, fundamentalists tend to form tightly knit groups with a distinct separatist subculture and a strict moral code (Marsden 1987). Evangelicals and conservatives tend to believe the same key doctrines as fundamentalists, but do not always insist on word-for-word Bible inerrancy, preferring the notion of infallibility of the Bible regarding essence of spiritual teachings. These groups may have a less separatist and intolerant attitude toward the rest of the world, while maintaining an emphasis on evangelism. Pentecostals and charismatics subscribe to the basic born again theology of fundamentalists with an additional belief in and practice of “spiritual gifts” such as speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing.

In this book, I use various terms interchangeably—fundamentalist, born again, conservative, evangelical, Christian—to talk about the same core doctrinal belief system. I recognize that the term Christian means much

more to many people, and I do not mean to imply that there are no other kinds of Christians. Similarly, while my references to Christianity are generally directed at fundamentalism, I do recognize that there are other more moderate and liberal branches.

The Larger Picture

Although this book does not address the political issues involved in religion or the problems of religious fanaticism, a brief aside here is appropriate. Over the years and continuing to this day the various rigid religions in the world have caused great pain and conflict among people. The very nature of dogma is to separate, because these kinds of systems claim to have the only truth. Therefore, no matter how altruistic its announcements, a rigid religion will produce judgment, because there will always be “others” who believe differently. Judgment leads to discrimination and, all too often, to persecution. Dogma can never bring us together to understand each other in our shared humanity.

The consequences of religious fanaticism are inevitably serious and disturbing. There are cases of victimization, for example, where believers are swindled by televangelists, when cults practice isolation and brainwashing, when people suffer sexual abuse or physical punishment in the name of a God and a faith. Religious fanaticism taken to extremes has led to such horrors as the mass murder/suicide of hundreds of People’s Temple members in Guyana and more recently to the inferno that engulfed the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Some people may dismiss these cases as bizarre and aberrant. Yet, they are only extensions of the fear-based apocalyptic thinking that permeates the ideology of many rigid religions. Christian fundamentalism can appear benign yet intolerance and mind control often lurk just beneath the surface.

More broadly, our society suffers from the attitudes and assumptions that stem in part from its rigid religious roots. Dualistic thinking about right and wrong seems to dominate many of our institutions. We assume personal value must be earned, and we compete ferociously. We attempt to master

the earth and exploit it for our own purposes. We constantly rationalize the use of force, both in families and internationally, although punishment and revenge have such negative consequences. We search outside ourselves for satisfaction, blaming and hating when it doesn't work. These patterns of behavior have many origins in traditional Christian theology and practice.

Because political and sociological issues have been examined elsewhere, this book focuses on the more personal ramifications of fundamentalism and other rigid religions. Clearly not every believer is an extremist and not every church is repressive. However, I believe that there are millions of former fundamentalists who are little recognized in their struggles to regain their health. Most of these people are regular folks, from all walks of life, without sensational tales to tell. They are intelligent and sincere people who once trusted their religion, but now need help in getting free.

About This Book

A personal religious faith satisfies core human needs—for security, for meaning, for community. Ultimately, however, the exclusivity and authoritarianism of a religion like Christian fundamentalism results in *disconnection*—from self, from other people, from the world. This is both the tragedy for those within the fold and the core damage for those in recovery after leaving. By focusing completely on the virtues of God, of another world, and of the future, fundamentalism and other similar systems create separation and distance from what we *know* as humans.

The exercises in this book are designed to help survivors of religious abuse reconnect with themselves as human beings, with other people, and with the present time and place, learning to enjoy the experiences of *this* world. For some, this healing can also mean a reconnection to God or spirituality in a new and healthy way.

It is important to note here that from this point on I will be writing to the survivor and use the second person “you” to enhance the personal feel of the recovery message.

A Two-Part Process

This book begins with an honest look at the damage you may have incurred through religious involvement and the origins of these issues. These dynamics are explored with an awareness that a person's problems in living develop in complex ways. Religious indoctrination does not cause psychological damage in isolation; there are multiple influences at work, including individual temperaments, family dysfunctions, social pressures, external events, and other challenges. The point here is to look at religion as one possible source of difficulty.

This book is not about blame. There can be a fine line between examining the past for the purpose of understanding and using the past as an excuse for continuing irresponsibility. As a psychologist, I am aware of the latter, both with clients and with other therapists. Sometimes we *accidentally* slip into avoidance of responsibility, when we get enamored with the origins of our problems and forget our creative power to make change in the present.

However, insights about how we came to be who we are certainly can help us know more about what's going on now. And with more knowledge comes more ability to choose. My way of answering the question of self-indulgence or self-pity is this: Becoming whole, healthy, and self-responsible involves two parts, What happened? and So what? The first part has to be explored. Otherwise, no matter how motivated you are to be healthy in your present life, you will be working in the dark. If you haven't yet explored the layers of experience in your life that have contributed to who you are now, with all your own wonderfully complex and powerful unconscious dynamics, you don't have all the pieces. Going back over your childhood, family, religious upbringing, and other experiences gives you essential information—not ammunition.

Even if you stop with just information, you can be enriched with greater compassion and understanding for yourself and others as well. But this information by itself will not empower you to change. Thus it is crucial to go on to the next stage—that of taking more responsibility for yourself in

the present. The profound truth is that we all do indeed create daily the quality of our existence, and we can learn to do this with much greater awareness. That is, our perceptions and expectations color what we deem to be reality, we act accordingly, and we get results that follow. You can let this happen in an old “default” mode and produce more of the same in your life, or you can decide to actively see and create a different reality.

In using the metaphor of the inner child for this two-part process, I want you to go beyond the awareness of the child. Some approaches leave you like a little child in the world—in touch with feelings, yes, but quite vulnerable nonetheless. My attitude is that you must also learn to be a grown-up, “adopt” your inner child, and actively create the life you want. With a renewed sense of hope and strength, it becomes possible to apply the salve of forgiveness to all things past, remembering that other people are also well-intended.

Overview

Part I of this book, “Sorting It Out,” is about understanding issues of religious indoctrination. The chapters in this section include inventories and writing exercises to help you assess your own experience. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the areas of impact you have experienced and typical phases people go through in recovery. Chapter 2 is my story, offered as an extended example of one person’s journey who has reflected on these issues. Chapter 3 and 4 outline the attractions of religion and how those attractions are manipulated to ensure adherence to dogma. Reading these two chapters will be important for your understanding of the factors in religious commitment. Chapter 5 discusses the major reasons people leave fundamentalism and what the leaving process can be like, then lists the many possible strengths that may also be gained from religious experiences. Chapter 6 explores the characteristics of a fundamentalist family and how they may have influenced you. If you converted as an adult, you may want to skip this chapter. However, it includes material about healthy family functioning that you may find useful.

Part II covers the healing process. Chapters in this and the following sections include numerous exercises aimed at helping you begin to change in the ways you desire. To get the most out of this book, it is very important to actually do these exercises—not just read them. Chapters 7 through 9 offer an approach to healing that involves the concept of an “inner child,” a caretaking “adult,” and the negative inner voice that undermines your happiness, here called your “idea monster.” Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the need to reclaim your feelings and work through phases of fear, anger, and grief. Guidelines are also provided for emergency self-care. All of these chapters are generally appropriate for anyone in religious recovery.

Part III, on growth, is about areas of further development. You may want to read these sequentially or pick and choose the chapters that most interest you. One approach is to concentrate on the areas you have the most difficulty with.

Case Stories and Exercises

The examples and case studies use throughout this book are composites of clients and other people I interviewed for this book. The details and specifics of the cases, such as geographical location, job descriptions, and names, have been changed for purposes of anonymity. These are typical cases of former fundamentalists and others recovering from involvement with a rigid system. When individuals are quoted, their actual words are used, although at times they have been edited for reasons of space, clarity and anonymity.

Interviewees and clients came from many different churches, which I chose not to identify because uncovering specific perpetrators is not the issue here. The important thing is that you begin to understand more about the principles involved in religious damage.

Throughout the book, I have tried to give examples that represent a variety of life experiences and religious recovery issues so that you can appreciate the range of challenges involved. However, this book is not an exhaustive telling of all the possible problems that can occur or the processes necessary

for recovery. Like the stories, the suggested exercises are also a sampling of steps you can take to heal and grow. Key areas of development are addressed, but one book cannot contain a full description of healthy functioning. I encourage you to follow up and get further assistance with particular life skills.

A Final Note

A self-help book is not meant to provide ultimate answers or take the place of individual effort and responsibility. Some of the ideas and exercises in the book will be of use, some will not. My expectation is that you will sift through the material, apply what is appropriate to your situation, and let go of the rest.

This book does not take the place of professional psychotherapy. Some of the symptoms and issues discussed are serious and even potentially life-threatening. Thus it is very important for you to get help if you need it. You do not need to struggle alone. You may want to work with the therapist of your choice in conjunction with reading this book. A therapy or support group may also be effective.

Confusing times are always more bearable and productive when you have names for things, and I have tried to provide a few labels and signposts here. Life transitions in general are challenging because of the loss of the familiar that occurs when you let go of accustomed places, roles, and relationships. This is true of geographical moves, career changes, divorce, and other major transitions. Changing your religious point of view is equally significant, if not more so, because your entire life can be affected. For a time you may feel like a trapeze artist suspended in midair. Emotions can be intense and long-lasting so I would like to reassure and congratulate you now. If you dare to live, you will find your way.

Part I

Sorting It Out

Some things that happened in that church make more sense now, and some things I'm still sorting out. It takes a while. A friend of mine that left two years ago still cries once in a while. I know of other people that left the church and either went through therapy or is still going through it. I'm scared sometimes, because I think that I may never get better. But then I remember that other people have left that church and are doing great now. My friend said that when she first left, all she knew was that her favorite color was pink and what her name was. She is fine now, and I will be too.

— Evelyn

Chapter 1

The Recovery Process

God
The plumber
who fixes
the pipes
the rabbit's foot
that couldn't hurt
The pipes
are leaking
and I hurt
—Terri

Breaking away from your faith has had an impact on your life, and probably a profound one. You may be feeling confused, guilty, empty, or bitter. You may be depressed about life or scared of the future. Perhaps you have trouble connecting with other people and life "in the world."

You are not alone in your experience. Many, many others have been through this and gone on to reconstruct their lives in meaningful and satisfying ways. While the experience of losing your religion is often painful and confusing at first, there is much to be learned and ultimately a profound maturity to be gained. This book can provide some assistance in your recovery by clarifying the issues involved, offering ideas for healing, and suggesting directions for further growth.

In general, leaving a cherished faith is much like the end of a marriage. The symptoms of separation are quite similar—grief, anger, guilt, depression, lowered self-esteem, and social isolation. But whereas help for divorced people is readily available, little if any assistance is available to help you to leave your religion. The familiar sources of church support are no longer there, and family members still in the fold may actually shun you. Secular

friends and even therapists may not understand what you have been through. Part of the difficulty is the anxiety, the terror you may feel about having to go it alone. After having been born again, leaving your faith can feel like being lost again.

There are many issues to work through--thoughts and feelings to process, new friends to make, new beliefs to nurture, and new ways to live. Because your religion took care of so much, defining and dictating reality in so many ways, you are now faced with largely reconstructing your life. Recovery begins with deciding to take that responsibility. This may seem overwhelming, but the benefits are indisputable. You get your life back on your terms. Indeed, the journey out can be thrilling as old fears and doubts give way to new and healthy possibilities.

Phases of Recovery

People seem to go through phases in their recovery from rigid religion, just as other life changes have typical sequences. This particular change goes deeper than many others and touches on all aspects of a person's life. The following sections offer a very general outline of the recovery pattern that I have observed and facilitated in clients:

1. Separation
2. Confusion
3. Avoidance
4. Feeling
5. Rebuilding

These are not discrete stages in the formal sense. There is considerable overlap between them and a person may be in more than one phase at a time. However, the overall pattern may help you understand where you have been, where you are now, and what you can expect in the future.

Phase 1: Separation

Before leaving, there is usually comfort from being "in the fold." Whether you were raised in the church or joined later, there was a time when things were at least okay. Some people report great satisfaction when describing their religious participation: values were affirmed and emotional needs were met; their belief system felt intellectually congruent. Other people describe less identification or less intense involvement, but some contentment nonetheless.

But then questions and doubts arise, perhaps gradually. Bits of new information become harder to integrate and new life experiences do not fit with standard dogma. It can feel unsettling when it seems that promises are not being fulfilled or that unexpected problems are occurring. That is, there are fewer pluses and more minuses. Your faith feels like a tapestry coming apart.

Many believers strive to continue being faithful, using denial, rationalization, or greater effort to be "victorious Christians," for example. Finally, it just becomes too much. Some people will make a sudden break, perhaps after a "last straw" experience. Others will struggle for a long time and only gradually let go. In trying to make sense of your doubts and fears, you might try to get help from church leaders, only to find that they don't want to hear you; it triggers their own fears. Over time, you may notice your attendance at church dropping; you might experiment with other churches, read the Bible less, pray less, and finally come to view yourself differently any longer as a member of the "body." The leaving can range from the traumatic to what seems relatively easy. Nonetheless, deep changes are occurring.

Phase 2: Confusion

Whether sudden or gradual, breaking away usually creates a state of serious confusion. This can be a major upheaval because your religion essentially defined your entire structure of reality and your old definitions no longer hold. Notions of who you were, your purpose in life, your relationship to others; needed explanations about the world; interpretations of the past;

expectations for the future; and directions about how to feel, think, make decisions, and lead your life have been lost. Letting go of such a massive structure can leave you feeling totally adrift. The sense of existential angst can be intense as you struggle to get a new foothold on life. You are starting over from scratch on all the basic questions about life. Many people in this phase feel like a naive child in an adult world.

Moreover, the fears instilled by the religion itself can produce additional anxiety. You were taught that if you did not believe you would go to hell. So it makes great sense if you have been nervous and scared about leaving. There may be times of near panic, when you wonder whether you've made a terrible mistake and will be forever damned. You might have trouble with intense feelings in this phase because you have been taught to interpret them as "conviction of the Holy Spirit." Sometimes people in this phase wonder if it wouldn't be simpler and safer to just "get right with God," and return to church. However, such returns rarely last.

But the experience of leaving can also be liberating, like breaking out of prison. If you feel oppressed by all the formulas and judgments, the rules and regulations, you might now feel a great relief, able to think and feel and experience much more of yourself. Some people describe a wonderful, almost euphoric, feeling of "coming home" when they settle in to the notion of just being alive and living life now, in this world. They see the world as a friendly place for a change, like a newly discovered candy store, with so much to offer. There can be a glorious excitement about taking charge of your own life.

Since leaving, I've changed how I think. I was stuck in a dualistic way of thinking. My world now seems filled with infinite possibilities. When I first left the church, I felt this weight being lifted from my shoulders. Freedom to be me is probably the most positive benefit.

— Richard

Phase 3: Avoidance

The next phase amounts to a kind of moratorium on religion and spirituality. Many people do not attend any church whatsoever and do not want to even discuss the concept of a God. They want to distance themselves from church to deny previous involvement.

Those who feel they have been abused by their religious experiences may also avoid any contact with church members or even church buildings. A number of people have trouble participating in organizations of other kinds as well, in political or social groups, for example. These patterns of avoidance and numbness seem to be methods of self-protection. From the perspective of an outside observer, this phase may look like "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," but it appears to be an essential part of the recovery process. To make a real break, you need to call a halt to life, as you once knew it and create some space and new direction for yourself.

Phase 4: Feeling

After a while, intense but mixed feelings tend to emerge. This can be a chaotic period. Most people experience some amount of anger. You might feel like an angry child losing Santa Claus. In thinking over the time spent being faithful, there can be rage over the damage done-life lost, negative self-image, ignorance about the world and real life, guilt and suffering, denial of pleasures, missing skills, hurt relationships, spoiled careers. If you have parents who used religion to justify severe discipline, or if you suffered actual abuse at the hands of church leaders, you could be very angry.

While some people find ways to express themselves during this phase, most wonder what to do with all their anger. Because of what you've been taught, you might think that you should simply forgive and forget rather than accept these feelings as legitimate. The rage may then go underground and stay with you. Bottled up emotions like these can leave you feeling hopeless, helpless, anxious, and depressed.

As you progress out of the avoidance phase, the other major feeling you will likely experience is grief. You really have had multiple losses.

Uncovering and grieving these losses will be key to releasing you from your pain. This process is akin to recovering from the death of a loved one. As described by Carol Staudacher (1987), this usually includes shock, disorganization, and reorganization. The loss of relationship with God can feel devastating, as though your parents have died; you no longer have a Heavenly Father. If you were deeply involved in a personal relationship with Jesus, you have also lost a best friend and lover. Added to this is the guilt of leaving and fears about what you did to cause the breakup. You might also be afraid that no one else will ever love you like that again. Yet going back seems impossible, and that makes the whole process all the more agonizing.

Phase 5: Rebuilding

Fortunately healing can occur. You can work through your pain and allow your inner strengths to emerge. In the rebuilding phase, people re-discover their self-worth. They rejoin life on a different basis. Perceptions and beliefs are reconstructed. You too can find new principles to live by and new meaning for your life. Some of your values may remain the same, but you sort through what you have been taught and keep what is valuable.

You learn anew to do things from choice. As you rebuild your sense of self, you become clearer about who you really are. You can respect your own thoughts and feelings and make decisions more confidently. For example, you might still believe that "love one another" is an important guideline for your life. On the other hand, "be here now" might also become important to you, and different from what you have been taught.

As you exercise your freedom and ability to create your own life, a sense of empowerment evolves that can feel exhilarating. You can now take full responsibility for yourself and enjoy the process. Your confidence grows as you address the many areas of life that need your creative energy-career, family, friendships, finances, recreation, and so on. You will need to rebuild your social network. Personal relationships will be different in important

ways. You might want a new place for spirituality in your life. Your approach to parenting your own children may need to be rethought.

Issues in Recovery

I feel like a scared, lonely, abandoned little kid that just can't get it right and who must be a real "bad boy." I have a large sense of not deserving anything that finally I am not important. This is connected to my "nothingness in the eyes of God," which was taught very early. My mother dedicated me to God when I was an infant. God is what is important, not me. Am I worth taking care of?

— Daryl

From what I have learned in my work with formerly religious people and from my own experience, certain issues of healing and growth appear to be common to the process of breaking away. Some areas of personal development continue to be important for many years. The areas of impact described here are typical consequences of leaving a conservative, fundamentalist church. They also apply in various ways to leaving other groups. The intensity of impact can range from simple life limiting to extreme harm.

Another important point is to realize that when you process religious issues, you end up processing all of your issues. These aspects of personal health and maturity are so basic. Thus, as you make a commitment to work on these areas, you are beginning a very far-reaching journey of growth and are to be commended.

Sense of Self

I didn't know that there was a difference between healthy self-esteem and puffed-up pride. It was the case in my family that personal strength was not encouraged. So, for me, when as an adult I realized that my religion was not enough to get me through

life, I had no belief in my own strength. For a long time, I was adrift until I could start believing in myself."

— Pam

Selfishness and pride are considered terrible things in a traditional Christian context. Thus when you leave the fold, it can be very difficult to know how to think of yourself. At one time, your individual identity was subsumed in the body of Christ. Now you may need to get to know yourself and learn how to appreciate your uniqueness.

Within fundamentalism, your worth was based on being a redeemed child of God. The atonement was essential to cleanse you of original sin. Now you may struggle with feeling bad and worthless. It will be important in your healing to fully accept yourself, to appreciate and love yourself, and learn about the kind of self-esteem that does not depend on external approval. After an indoctrination about the sins of the "flesh," learning to appreciate your own body and enjoy your sexuality is likely to be another challenging but rewarding area of growth.

Another devastating assumption of conservative Christianity is that you are helpless and hopeless without the salvation formula. Within that belief system, the only capabilities you could hope to have been outside of yourself. All the strength, wisdom, and love considered worth anything were to be channeled through you from God. Consequently, you may now feel like an empty shell, without any core, and you may still have a residual tendency to look outside yourself for security and satisfaction. A critical area of recovery will be to discover and learn to use the inner resources you do have. This is often an exciting area of growth.

Emotional Struggles

Fundamentalists and others typically go through intense times of emotional turmoil when leaving their faith. They may feel very angry with family, church leaders, or God. Often they feel betrayed or cheated. A religious

upbringing can be abusive in a number of ways. Angela expressed it this way:

I am angry. I am angry that I was fed so many lies and that I believed them for so many years, making important decisions based on that false information. Those decisions are some that I will have to live with and deal with until I die. I am angry that I had to pay for my parents' continued existence in their cocoon of safety. They wanted to believe that life was as they said it was, and in lying to me they didn't have to face reality.

I am angry at other Christians and can hardly stand to be around them beyond surface occasions. When they start talking about their belief systems, I want to blow up in anger. I feel like I want to protect other innocent children who are being trashed by those religious beliefs.

Feelings of grief can also be quite real for the recovering fundamentalist. The losses are multiple—a primary love relationship with the divine, a spiritual family, and a supportive community. Despite the negative aspects of dogmatic thinking and judgment, church groups often provide a social context that is difficult to match in the secular world. Leaving the faith can also mean alienation from your own family. Until you replace or amend key relationships in your life, you might feel abandoned and very lonely.

Accompanying grief are fear and anxiety. When you have lost your place in what was once a safe cocoon, your status as a protected child of God and your part in the cosmic scheme, it is natural to feel adrift. At first, this feeling of total disconnectedness can be very frightening. The world can seem like an ominous place in which you have no defenses. Old fears of hell and Armageddon can resurface, even after you have rejected them intellectually. Your task in this area will be to build trust within yourself and the skills needed to deal with the world.

Guilt is often a continuing issue, because it is one of the only feelings indulged by religion. You are probably used to feeling bad for many things,

and now you no longer have the old means of forgiveness. Because fundamentalism splits everything into black and white, you may have developed an unrelenting perfectionism. You will need to allow your-self to be human now, understand old messages about mistakes and "shoulds," and learn flexibility and compassion. The result will be a much more relaxed and open way of being.

For Daryl, a man in his fifties who grew up with a pious mother, guilt was always present when he thought of himself. As a minister he spent his career caring for others, and for many years he ached for the self-love he withheld. He described some of his old assumptions:

I feel extremely guilty if I go for myself. I am to be perfect in carrying out my divine mission. When I am less than perfect, I am a guilty sinner. I am less than perfect when I get tired, needy, lonely, et cetera. It is very hard for me to take or find satisfaction in a job well done, and I do most jobs well. Praise fails to register or make any difference.

Being in the World

After leading a religious life, it can be quite an adjustment to live an ordinary human life in the here and now. It can be hard to let go of the idealism of a cosmic plan and a future in heaven. With all the trouble in the world, it can be comforting to think God will settle accounts and the worthy few will get their reward. Looking to God for the perfect relationship can be far easier than struggling with human connections. Now it is probably a challenge for you to be in this world, putting up with the problems or even enjoying the pleasures. Former fundamentalists often need to heal from the habit of denigrating the world and other people.

Fully appreciating the here and now usually takes some learning. Margaret is a mother of four, the daughter of fundamentalists, and a former minister's wife who is learning to appreciate simple pleasures:

I wasn't taught an appreciation for nature-that God was in nature. It was more like "This is an evil existence; it'll be better by and by." So I wasn't taught the beauty of a sunset or how it feels to walk through grass. That is a deep regret I have today. I don't know how to experience the beauty of nature and to be as one with it.

Participating in bettering the world, such as work on environmental, political, or social concerns, is an even greater stretch. Accepting that you are indeed home, here and now, will enhance your recovery. You can let go of wishful thinking and be here fully in the drama of humanity. Other people are not saints or devils, and life is a rich mixture of pleasure and pain.

Self-Responsibility

Taking charge of your own life is central to recovery from religious indoctrination. If you learned to wait passively for God's will and to feel guilty for making your own decisions, this will be a challenge. Notions of responsibility were confused in fundamentalism, since you were at the same time accountable for sin, for making the choice to accept Christ, and for leading others to God. You were supposed to be like Christ, but not through your own doing. In fact, self-reliance was the most dangerous of all attitudes. Thus learning to trust yourself will be a new journey. It might be a whole new experience to be in touch with your feelings. However, in order to take charge of your life, you will need to reclaim your right to feel what you feel. Processing emotions for yourself and expressing them to others may be areas you will need to work on, since you were probably taught to repress and deny your feelings.

You will also need to let go of rigid restraints on your thinking and allow yourself to form opinions, beliefs, and values of your own. You may need to learn skills for decision-making and goal setting. At times the personal responsibility involved in making choices can seem overwhelming as it did to Betsy:

I didn't want to work, answer my phone, or talk to anyone. I had been taught that God is responsible for everything and that if you pray for something, God will get it to you. And here I suddenly had to do everything for myself.

After the convenience of a preformed worldview that answered every question, it may seem a weighty task to develop your own approach to life. In some ways it is more comfortable to seek God's will through the guidance of the church and accept someone else's word for truth. Thus it may require a giant developmental leap for you to embrace both the freedom and grave responsibility of human choice.

Meaning and Spirituality

Losing your faith can shake the very foundation of your life. If it was a personal commitment, your life may have revolved around religious values and activities. If you were taught a religious view of life as a child, it can likewise be very disturbing to discover the need to change your assumptions now. This ambiguity and confusion can continue for some time and may be very uncomfortable. It is quite possible to become depressed.

Most former fundamentalists feel injured in the spiritual arena; they feel hurt and find it difficult to pursue spirituality, because they fear the same traps that caused problems in their religion. Yet it is not possible to live with no structure of meaning whatsoever. For those who find spirituality to be a continuing source of meaning and purpose, their spirituality needs to be redefined and made more personal. Kevin had a very painful breaking away experience, which left him reeling. He still values the spiritual life, however, and found it helpful to explore other religions as he recovered his sense of meaning:

I think there are many mansions, as Jesus said, and I'm still in touch with the creative power of the universe. I feel a real personal bond with something outside myself. I hang onto that. I find myself walking down the street talking in my mind to God. I still do that. But I don't think of God the same way I used to. I

don't believe the dogma anymore. The words are just signs pointing to something more powerful.

Losing all that was once meaningful without having any replacement can create deep despair. Your personal work here will be to find the drive within yourself to survive and regain your health. As you heal and learn to take care of yourself, you will gradually need to reconstruct a system of meaning in your life. Alternatives will become more apparent as you have more open contact with the world.

Exercise 1.1: Impact Inventory

The issues involved in religious recovery vary from person to person and change over time, depending on the course of the individual journey. The following checklist gives you an opportunity to identify the issues that apply to you now and to think about how much each affects you. This exercise can help you to begin some self-reflection. After you finish this book and have made progress in the recovery process, it should be interesting for you to complete this inventory again and see how your responses have changed.

Issues Checklist

Directions : For each item, mark the number that best reflects the impact that issue or feeling has on your daily life. For example, mark 1 if the issue is mildly bothersome to you, 3 if it is moderately troubling, and 5 if it is severely disturbing. Mark 2 or 4 if the issue falls somewhere between.

Issue/Feeling	Severity
Confusion	1 2 3 4 5
Anxiety or fear	1 2 3 4 5
Lack of clear identity or personal values	1 2 3 4 5
Negative sense of self	1 2 3 4 5
Emptiness, as if you have no core	1 2 3 4 5

Negative image of your body and discomfort with sexuality	1 2 3 4 5
Lack of meaning or purpose in life	1 2 3 4 5
Anger and bitterness	1 2 3 4 5
Loneliness	1 2 3 4 5
Loss and grief	1 2 3 4 5
Depression	1 2 3 4 5
Persistent guilt	1 2 3 4 5
Difficulty enjoying daily pleasures	1 2 3 4 5
Unreasonably high expectations, perfectionism	1 2 3 4 5
Trouble appreciating people	1 2 3 4 5
Difficulty with self responsibility	1 2 3 4 5
Lack of deep self-love and skills for self-care	1 2 3 4 5
Trouble thinking for yourself	1 2 3 4 5
Difficulty feeling and expressing emotion	1 2 3 4 5
External focus for satisfaction	1 2 3 4 5

These issues will be addressed in later chapters. Healing and growth mean learning to love and trust yourself. Loving your “inner child” is a direct and understandable means of self-love and is the approach used here to build a foundation. Trust includes learning how to listen to your own inner wisdom. You have the inner strength and wisdom necessary to guide your own life, and you can learn to tap into deep inner resources.

Like a gardener who cares for growing plants by carefully watering, feeding, and cultivating, rather than forcing new growth, you also can tend to your own personal growth over time. Your changes will take a natural, developmental course. This book will guide you through the stages of work you can do for yourself. It is important, however, not to rush or take on all

the issues at once. You might want to maintain a journal to process your feelings and to complete exercises from this book.

Life is meant to be enjoyed! Intuitively you know this, despite what you have been taught about enduring the world while looking forward to the next. The concepts presented in this book are meant to take you beyond coping and survival to a level of thriving that allows you to fully be the person you want to be.

Chapter 2

My Story

I was one serious kid. Despite my healthy sense of humor, I worried a lot about the Big Questions. When in bed with a severe cold, I pondered my death. Especially as I hit puberty, I had to understand everything thoroughly. I wanted to get it right and make it mine. No hand-me-down religion. I was going to feel it for myself and work it out intellectually too. At sixteen, I decided to chronicle my spiritual life. An excerpt:

I don't know when I was actually saved. I believed in Jesus most of my life, I guess. My mother says that when I was about five, she had punished me for something and sent me to my room. A little while later she saw me jumping on my bed and saying that Jesus had forgiven my sin and come into my heart.

— From a history of my spiritual life written at sixteen

Every child finds a way to meet basic needs, and from an early age I chose a religious path to find the satisfaction that I craved. I grew up a middle child in a missionary family of seven. Both of my parents were kept busy establishing churches and Bible schools in the Orient. The Christian view of life was the only one I knew. So when my family struggled with continuing conflicts, I deepened my involvement with faith and church. The semitropical climate of my childhood meant sundresses and bare feet, cicadas and lizards, and our own little aboveground swimming pool to survive the summer. My parents employed a Chinese couple to help with the house, and they stayed with the family for eighteen years. The wife was my nanny. She taught me to speak Cantonese before I learned English.

My sister and I played games with our dolls. Our favorites were "hospital" and "orphanage." In bandaging the dolls perhaps we bandaged our own psychic hurts. We fought a lot as kids. Our parents had their own problems, and as missionary kids themselves, knew little about what to do beyond

punishment and prayer. I have warm memories of family life too. Dad made wooden stilts for us. Mom sang with us at bedtime from a beautiful homemade scrapbook of Christian songs. One of them went "Mommy talks to God, Daddy talks to God, And so do I, And so do I." We had fun filling in with other names of people we knew. The lullabies gave sweet assurance of God's love and protection. A classic picture of a guardian angel helping children across a bridge in rough weather hung on the bedroom wall.

I began school in a Chinese kindergarten, where I was popular for my blonde hair and origami skills. My sister and I rode to school in a pedicab, past beggars on the street, and jostled by the crush of bicycle traffic. After kindergarten, though, we were largely sheltered by the American subculture in Taiwan and had little contact with the Asian culture around us. Our family was in a foreign, heathen land for the purpose of teaching, not learning. Sadly, I remember strong sights, sounds, and smells in the Buddhist temples, associated only with pity and disgust.

In spite of the inconsistency of our public and private family life, the core message of Christianity still made sense to me. It was my personal relationship with God that counted. I became infatuated with Jesus, in love with Him. It didn't matter what anyone else did. I was determined to mature into an ideal Christian. I wanted to be part of *God's family* with all my heart and soul. Only much later did I understand the acknowledgement I sought.

During a furlough back in the States, I was introduced to the charismatic style of worship in the Assemblies of God. I loved it. Since I had always been demonstrative myself, the emotional expressiveness felt so warm and real. I did not "receive the Baptism" until later, but I became more involved in my faith.

My family traveled to many supporting churches in California, reporting on missionary progress. We kids helped by dressing up in traditional Chinese clothes, saying a few words in Chinese, or singing a song. I felt uncomfortable, but I wanted to do what I could for "the Lord's work." When we headed back to the mission field, I shared my parents' sense of purpose.

“In the Spirit”

In junior high, I was sent to a private Christian boarding school intended to provide a good education to "missionary kids" in a Christian environment. Bible classes were taught daily, chapel was weekly, and church was required twice on Sunday.

I became intensely religious and fairly outspoken about it. I wrote a paper for school entitled "My Beliefs" and turned it into a huge project. On my own, I wrote treatises on topics like, "Why dancing is wrong."

The Second Coming was one of my major concerns. I wrote a paper discussing all the biblical evidence for the "tribulation" and the question of whether the Christians would be "raptured" (taken up to heaven) out of it beforehand. I studied and wrote about predestination and "eternal security," scouring the Scriptures for hints about the theological problems of whether a Christian was "once saved always saved" or had to work at staying in a state of grace.

I made a great effort with all these study projects, but I continued to have emotional needs that were unfulfilled. The energy and time that went into my faith is actually rather amazing in retrospect. It is sad now to look back and understand the tension between my normal teenage need to belong in a peer group and my desire for spiritual acceptability. My faith taught me to glorify the idea of being different, which psychologically fostered a feeling of alienation that I tried to justify in my writing. Sometimes I also seemed to be fending off sexual interests. With awakening hormones I delved more deeply into my Christian faith.

I continued feeling discouraged and was struggling with the concerns of growing up. Finally, one weekend in eighth grade, I "received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit" - the experience Pentecostal Christians seek *after* being saved. It means that you are filled with the Spirit, and usually speak in tongues as evidence.

My "baptism" experience was an ecstatic forty-five minutes of speaking in tongues, which felt like ten minutes. Even now, I believe it was a very special mystical experience, one that I am not sure how to interpret. It certainly was an altered state, with overwhelming feelings of total love and acceptance comparable with the spiritual transcendence experienced by people in a variety of spiritual traditions.

I returned to school with a new confidence and contentment. My prayer life included speaking and singing "in the Spirit" (in tongues). I felt happy and loved. I had meaning and I belonged. For the rest of my adolescent years, my faith was central to my sense of well-being.

At school I shared my enthusiasm for the "Spirit-filled" life. Some friends went with me to Pentecostal Fellowship meetings, and two of them also "received the Baptism" when praying with me in the dorm.

For a while I spent my Wednesdays fasting. I got special permission to miss meals so I could go to the dorm rooftop and pray. I was convinced that the Second Coming was very soon. This was frequently preached in Pentecostal circles along with ominous warnings about "the world."

I was keenly aware of an imminent end and the urgency to spread the word. This produced seriousness in my communications with others and, at the same time, a thrill in my private longing to be with Jesus.

Teen Times

Other aspects of teenage life proceeded. I became involved in sports, grades, piano, dorm life, and plenty of the "good, clean fun" that comes with the camp like atmosphere of a boarding school. I worried about acne and agonized with the best of them about my latest crush. Flirting was always a bit of a mystery.

Dancing became a point of confusion for me. We were not allowed to dance at school, but I went home for weekends. My friend Laura invited me to a record hop at the American military teen center. I kept it a secret from my parents - and felt guilty about what I expected to be a sinful, sensuous

grinding of bodies that would heat up lustful thoughts and lead directly to sex. So I was surprised to find out that it was mostly great fun. Rock and roll didn't really seem like the devil's music, and getting a little attention from boys felt pretty good too. After that, I alternated between sneaking off to record hops and declaring to Laura that I did not want to be caught dancing when the Lord came back. She was pretty tolerant. Although she was also a Christian, since I had "led her to the Lord," she suffered little guilt for having fun. At a slumber party with her non-Christian friends, we stayed up all night playing pinochle. I was developing little chinks in my armor against "the world."

But I remained puzzled about ordinary human faults. My own failings were very disturbing. I desperately wanted the "*fruits* of the Spirit" (love, joy, peace) and not just the "*gifts* of the Spirit" (tongues, healing, prophecy). Speaking in tongues was wonderful, but to me the real miracle of Christianity was a transformed heart. I was more in awe of true love than any healing or fulfilled prophecy. But no matter how zealous I became, I did my share to contribute to the pain and conflict in my family. I felt guilty for my part and I blamed the others for theirs. How nice it would have been to learn something about communication or how to express feelings! But nowhere in our belief system was there any help for working on these things - only hope that God would do miracles. Troubled relationships only meant lack of faith or submission to God. I remember sadness and unrelenting guilt for disappointing a God who had sent his son to die. I wrote in my diary:

I want to be perfect . *I want Jesus Christ to control me completely - my thoughts, words, and actions.* I want people to see Him in me and believe because they've seen what He can do for a person. I have a long way to go but with Jesus' help I'll be a blessing.

My main trouble is at home. Oh God, I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Thank you for your healing spirit. I need you to mend me so many times.

At the end of tenth grade, at the age of sixteen, we moved to Southern California. I thought it was a yearlong furlough but it turned out to be permanent and created much grief later. The good-byes at summer camp with my friends were sad. For four years I had lived with them, playing pranks and saying prayers, singing songs and studying for exams, shouting at ball games and whispering secrets. In my yearbook they wrote:

Thank you, Marlene for being the mirror through which Christ reflected Himself to bring me back to Him. Your witness has meant much to me.

You're about the best Christian I know.

You've been such a great friend to me this year. It was through your concern I as eventually filled with the Holy Spirit. Praise the Lord!

My religion at this time of my life met my many needs perfectly. Upon arriving in a strange country, I was able to fit in immediately with the youth group at church. We understood each other because of our common belief system. My faith also gave me a continued meaning in life. My huge high school was full of potential converts, and street witnessing was a dramatic addition to my Christian experience.

To top it off, I soon had a Christian boyfriend at the church. He demonstrated to me how to talk about Christ to "hippies," emphasizing the natural high we could get from Jesus. Most of our relationship occurred over the telephone. He instructed me in ways of being Christian and cool at the same time. For this I was grateful. Coming from overseas, my clothes were wrong, and I had a lot of slang to learn. The adjustment wasn't always easy; mood swings and low self-esteem became a problem for me, as they do for many teenagers.

I always sought a spiritual solution, so God filled in. My love relationship with Jesus eased the rough edges of those years. I rarely had a "steady," but I always had Jesus. I remember feeling a serene calm inside, knowing at least one person that always found me totally acceptable.

Making the Break

Leaving my faith was a very slow process. It was in many ways a reluctant parting and it's hard to say how many years it took. Some changes began when I was sixteen, but it was ten years before I stopped calling myself a Christian.

New Ideas

Overseas we were taught to feel lucky to be Americans, to be patriotic and anti-Communist, and that our culture was superior to the one surrounding us. There was little discussion of the Vietnam War, even though it was right next-door. We met GIs who were on leave, but they didn't talk about the war. I didn't give it much thought, other than that it was a shame but somebody had to stop the Communists. From our Christian point of view, the turmoil of the war was simply another sign of the end times. It was inevitable. We thought that war protesters should get right with God instead of trying to change history.

Despite world travel, my life had been sheltered. High school in California was for me the beginning of provocative new information: existentialism, Eastern philosophy, Black literature, and modern poetry. Studying Shakespeare taught me that profound thought wasn't limited to Christians. I read *Siddhartha*, *The Stranger*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *Stranger in a Strange Land*. I was both intrigued and upset, unwilling to simply screen out what I was learning. Sustaining my faith was taking more and more effort.

The "Jesus Movement" came into full swing in Southern California at about this time. We had the Christian version of flower children: going to Calvary Chapel in jeans and bare feet, baptisms in the surf, Christian rock and roll,

and being different from our parents. There were converts by the hundreds, and I was excited. We had a sense of cosmic purpose.

A memorable highlight was a week of organized witnessing in San Francisco with "Youth With A Mission." The group received continued training in evangelism and assorted topics. Walking into the hip subculture was for me like Dorothy in the Land of Oz - "Drugs and occult and sex, oh my!" I was treading carefully through Satan's territory. Witnessing to a longhaired man in Golden Gate Park who said he was Jesus left me stumped! Every evening we tallied conversions, and compared notes about the challenges we had faced. We memorized more Scripture and refined our arguments to handle the tough cases. Of course, we interpreted objections to the Gospel as "darkness" rather than honest reasons people had for not being Christian. We prayed for the souls we had spoken with each day and asked God to "convict" them of sin and lead them to the light.

In June, 1970, I graduated second in my high school class and made an evangelistic speech at graduation. For a basically shy girl, in front of a stadium full of people, it was quite a pitch. Evidently I had become more entrenched in my beliefs as a way of dealing with the new, discordant information. The school administration neglected to read my address beforehand, which I considered an act of God. I recall delivering my words with fearless enthusiasm because I was being "used":

That we as graduates are now going into a confused, embittered, and violent world is a fact which no one can contest. Our goals must be above the all too common and somewhat glib rhetoric of graduation speeches of the past. Our goals must be to work for the genuine brotherhood of mankind - true peace - based on love and mutual respect of our fellow man. This can only be brought about by the transformation of individuals through the power of Christ.

Intellectual Challenge

I debated between Oral Roberts University and the University of California at Irvine and chose the latter - so that I could be a witness there! The

Christian students there took evangelizing seriously. We met for Bible studies in the park on campus. For a while I even lived with them in a Christian commune, getting the family warmth I always craved.

I enjoyed college for the intellectual stimulation and challenge. My exposure to new ideas continued. In a multidisciplinary course, I learned about the history of Western culture from the time of Plato and Aristotle to the present, covering major movements in philosophy, political science, literature, and art. We read St. Augustine, Descartes, Mill, Marx, Freud, Beckett, and many others. It was interesting to find out about religious assumptions that were challenged by Copernican astronomy, the rise of empirical science, and Darwinism. I was surprised at how many philosophers had tried to prove the existence of God.

Most of all, I was intrigued by analyses of core existential dilemmas. I wrote a paper about Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and "The Grand Inquisitor," ending with, "The tragic grandeur of humanity is the struggle to be free in constant fear of freedom." For me, the notion of free will had always been a problem in the contest of an omniscient and omnipotent God. How could we possibly choose our lives or choose salvation if God knows all and controls all? I felt increasingly compelled by notions of personal freedom.

In psychology I learned about behaviorism, which asserts the then mind-boggling thesis that *everything is learned*. This meant that, in theory, *all human behavior is predictable*. In response to B. F. Skinner's book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, I wrote a paper defending free choice. But the idea that behavior is learned was also liberating. It was revolutionary for me to think that personal problems or "bad habits" could be the result of environmental conditioning rather than sin. I noticed a growing softness in my judgment of human beings. We were all in the same boat, struggling to meet our needs.

From Eastern thought and existentialism, I soaked up ideas about awareness and responsibility. I fell in love with the notion of being fully present in

every moment and thereby *creating* one's life. This was personal and powerful. The individual was all-important instead of "mankind." Choices were not only available but were critical for identity and existence. I wrote about paying attention to small pleasures and participating in the dance of life:

Time moves on, in rhythmic step, relentless but not unpleasant.
We can dance to the beat, weaving in and out, sometimes ahead,
sometimes behind, back and forth crisscrossing the steady
advance. Always knowing however, that we must keep moving.
There is no sitting down to rest. So try to enjoy the dance, baby. It
can be beautiful at times as well as terrifying. We must savor
those segments of beauty.

For a New Year's resolution, I wrote, "Enjoy the dance" but later "I weep for the struggle, longing to be set free yet wanting my fetters." I read Ram Dass's *Be Here Now* and tried to convince myself to give up desire and attachment. I wanted contentment and inner peace. "Extricate from desire," I read, "the fire of internal struggle."

Discovering Compassion

Majoring in social ecology meant pursuing my interest in a multidisciplinary approach to social issues. Six quarters of field study got me out into the community and learning skills. In my preschool placements the children were wonderful - natural, curious, creative, affectionate, alive - which led me to question some of the Christian precepts I had accepted before, all based on original sin. Learning child development was quite the eye-opener. For example, a child's behavior that appears "selfish" is often part of learning identity and self-worth.

In my desire to help people, I took courses in counseling. Early on, I thought that secular psychology had something to offer Christians, particularly in the skill of good *listening*. Christians don't tend to concern themselves with this. And as I learned the art of facilitating a person's personal change, I couldn't help developing a respect for natural, intuitive

growth processes. People are for the most part well intentioned, I realized. A good therapist provides loving support the way a gardener tends her plants. A humanistic view of humans made sense to me. It seemed to work in practical ways, and it felt good to me emotionally.

Nevertheless for a long time I tried to integrate my new awareness and skills with my faith. For one of my field studies, I worked with another woman to start a 24-hour hotline and walk-in Christian counseling center. The experience brought my growing frustration with the church patriarchy into sharper focus. To my surprise, we were told we could only get support from Calvary Chapel if we had male leadership. So we prayed for a male director! The first one we were offered by Calvary soon created problems - he canceled our phone service and left town. We had the service reinstated and carried on. Finally one of our male counselors, a newly converted Christian, stepped into the director position, saying God had led him. At the time that was enough for me. I had been taught well enough to repress my anger. Personal feeling and individual credit are of no importance compared to getting the Lord's work done, I believed. In the end, the One Way Help Center (audacious name!) operated for four full years.

Just as I was disappointed with sexist and hypocritical Christians, non-Christians who impressed me soon influenced me. When I made friends with two people involved in an Eastern religion, I found they were just as enthusiastic about their religion as I was about mine. They were happy and loving and delighted with their marriage. I saw more "fruits of the Spirit" in them than I saw in most Christians.

I couldn't simply dismiss this perception the way I had been taught, chalking it up to "Satan disguised as an angel of light." These people were real. I was becoming tired of twisting everything to fit. But I tried to hang on. Jesus was still precious to me.

For an anthropology class, I wrote an extensive paper about the cultural context of sexism in the Bible. I maintained that the comments about women in the Scriptures were understandable by examining the times. I

said that they were descriptive, not prescriptive for us. I wanted to think that our faith could be relevant, that Christianity could change with the modern world and still be the viable truth. But despite my effort, sermons at church about "women's place" became more and more intolerable to me.

All through college, I also worked as a waitress, meeting people and overcoming my shyness. This also helped me leave my religious cocoon. The demands of the job first taught me to function more competently in the world. Then, as I learned to relate more openly to a variety of people (since everyone has to eat), I became more accepting and appreciative of human diversity. Gradually I stopped filtering and twisting information. I learned more and more and felt better and better. I didn't want to see people only as potential converts. I wanted to love them for who they were and I wanted to love life here and now. Eventually I stopped categorizing people as sheep and goats, saved and damned. I was on my way out.

A Wider World

In the course of taking art classes in college, I thought the Dada and Surrealist movements were fascinating because they rebelled against the established order, exalted the irrational unconscious, and honored the absurd. Perhaps because of my mystical experiences, I was attracted to the Surrealists' interest in dreams. Weary from my efforts to understand everything, I became more accepting of my own dream life, my visual appreciation, and my enjoyment of the unusual.

A film history class introduced me to Truffaut, Buñuel, and Bergman and the beautiful innocence of children in "*Small Change*," the agony of the personal decision in "*The Exterminating Angel*," the terrible strangeness of humanity in "*Un Chien Andalou*," the immense profundity and fragility of existence in "*Cries and Whispers*."

One night I dreamed that I was in outer space at a space station that was trying to contact Earth for help. We were in danger of blowing up any minute, and I watched a technician calling desperately on a telephone. He did not know that the other end of his telephone line was not connected to

anything. I remember the horror of realizing that *no one was listening*. The next day I knew the dream was about God. But rather than feeling terrified - or in addition to being terrified - I felt an incredible awareness of *being alive*. The dream had felt real; I had faced certain impending death. Being alive the next day felt like a wonder, as though I had woken up. I walked slowly that day and allowed myself to actually feel my footsteps. I can still remember the crisp air and the clear edges of the leaves on the trees. The day was long and full and I felt like I had learned something at a very deep level - something important that I wanted to always remember - to *notice my life*.

Last Links

Journal entries and letters from my college years reveal swings between anguished frustration and renewed faith. I always heaped blame for the problems on myself, looked to God for help, and thanked him for any improvements in my life. Looking back, I can see that self-respect was a near impossibility:

There is a secret of being a Christian that I have not managed to master. Every time everything seems to be going fine, I lose control of myself in some way. Then I hate myself, feel estranged from God, and start despairing. It frustrates me so much that I can't know the will of God. Or when I do know it and can't fulfill it. But my hope is irrepressible. I'll never stop trying.

I think God speaks in a very soft voice. I think I've been hearing it but I'm not sure.

The Lord is becoming very real to me, and I'm finding out how very slow I am to learn things.

I was also becoming very confused about sex. My college boyfriend was not raised the way I was, even though my first success was to take him to church and see him converted. Our hormones ran high, and I had trouble with the usual female gatekeeper responsibility. Somehow we managed to

avoid going "all the way," but that was more of a technicality. My sexuality was a wonderful discovery, but the guilt was also tremendous. I broke off the relationship several times and suffered just as much guilt for hurting him. I was convinced on more than one occasion that God wanted me to let go. The effort to figure out God's will was exhausting.

Finally after three years we got married. At that point, we felt led by God. I allowed myself to fall in love more deeply. I stopped debating and began enjoying the happiness of commitment with another human being. Very unintentionally, I prayed and studied the Bible less and less. I gradually realized that I no longer felt emotionally needy all the time. Being loved and held daily was wonderful. The closeness with a real live person had a profound effect: It broke my addiction to God.

Outside the Fold

I continued on to graduate school, pleased to be learning about domains of human interaction that we could work on - not everything was spiritual after all. My helplessness and shame and dependence on God were being replaced with real abilities.

I learned counseling and teaching skills, marriage and family therapy, and behavior change techniques with children. My husband and I ran a home for emotionally and behaviorally disturbed boys. Then we received a federal grant and worked together with the county to create a shelter for troubled teenagers. At the university I helped with programs on male-female relationships, assertiveness, sexuality, and empathy. As a counseling intern, I worked with individuals, couples and groups. I spent several years working in human services with teenagers and families in a variety of settings, including foster care training and placement. I became especially interested in *preventing* psychological damage and *promoting* health. With more knowledge and skill in human relations, I felt enriched and empowered.

Retaining an existentialist regard for the power of choice and responsibility, my doctoral dissertation concerned self-direction. After graduate school I

taught briefly on the university level and then began a private practice as a psychologist. In the course of my work and my own growth, I became interested in the long-lasting influence of religious involvement.

As my therapeutic skills developed, I found that non-rational and nonverbal methods had an important role. I became trained and then taught other therapists to utilize *inner state work*, which blends guided imagery, hypnosis, and bodywork. Movement and art and group dynamics have also been important in my practice. In general, my approach emphasizes helping clients to tap into their inner resources for healing and growth.

My personal growth has taken quantum leaps with the experience of parenting. With my first husband I had a son who has taught me immeasurably - about life, about myself. I am convinced that we all need to listen to the wisdom of our children.

My divorce and a move to Colorado made for a very challenging time. Being on my own with a child and working full time forced me to dig down and find the inner strength I needed. I also had a lot to learn about self-love and self-care.

A second marriage, a stepdaughter, and a daughter have given me more to treasure in my life. I continue to be impressed with the options we have to create the kind of life we want to live. My family enables me to be myself within a nurturing environment. True love is quite possible, and families don't have to be dysfunctional all the time.

Most recently, my work in California again involved teaching at the university level, this time focusing on issues of human diversity and skills to enhance communication. The need to learn tolerance and cooperation in the world today is obvious; it has been gratifying to continue toward this in some way and to watch students find that they can learn relationship skills to match the ideals of their rhetoric. I looked forward to more work in the domain of cross-cultural and personal understanding.

Along the way, it has also been fascinating to learn about the function of art in human expression and social statement. I recently curated an exhibit with sixteen artists and a group of art therapy clients, as well as work of my own. The show, called "Thou Shalt Not," used a variety of media to express feelings about religious indoctrination and spirituality, offering both protest and hope.

Lifelong Process

I left the faith of my childhood because of old promises that were not fulfilled and new promises that were. The diaries I kept made it clear to me later that being a Christian did not solve my personal or interpersonal problems. I had mystical experiences, which seemed to give me a glimpse of the divine, and I had the hope of future union with God. For these I am still grateful. But in my everyday life I lived with enormous guilt and frustration over not being the person I thought I should be. Good things were always due to God and failures were always mine.

Encountering other ideas gave me new options. As I became armed with alternatives, I was more willing to confront the problems in my religion, such as sexism, the notion of original sin, and the dichotomy of saved and damned. Allowing myself some intellectual integrity was an enormous relief. Then I allowed myself *to be in the world*. By letting go of judgment, I could participate in the joys and care about the problems, instead of focusing on the hereafter. I could be close to people and realize the warmth of *human* love. And very importantly, I developed a framework for thinking about myself that included self-esteem. With all of these developments, there was no turning back. The mental and emotional doors to the future had been opened. The honesty and gut-level confrontation with my humanness - the good, the bad, and the ugly - was delicious.

This is not to say that I haven't had much pain and struggling. The loss of an all-encompassing belief system has profound consequences, including ambiguity and responsibility. Over the years I have dealt with all the issues addressed in this book. Family relationships have been forever changed.

Like a lost child, I have had to reconstruct reality. I have had to examine and recreate a great many assumptions - about the meaning of life, the world, myself, others, the past, present, and future. Automatic thoughts and behaviors are difficult to change, and I continue to wrestle with old beliefs that are powerful and often unconscious.

Chapter 3

Understanding Your Involvement

It's really true that it provided all these answers, and assurances.
Right now, I could sing, "Jesus Loves Me," accurately ... I was
ultimately and finally loved.

— Marty

As you look back at your religious experience, you may feel puzzled and ashamed or embarrassed to tell people about it. It is important to acknowledge these feelings. Understanding the reasons for your religious involvement can help you better understand yourself. You can then make intelligent choices for your future.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is always tempting to judge. The awareness you have now can make your past involvement in fundamentalism seem very strange. Therefore, it is vital for you to realize that you are not the same person now. The choices and commitments you made in the past were ones that made the most sense to you at the time—just as you may have chosen a spouse or a career that you later outgrew. The point is you are human. You try to do the best you can; no one deliberately plans to create unhappiness.

The factors involved in something as broad as religious commitment are always complex and include conscious choice, external pressure, and internal drives. Some of your motivations may still seem reasonable and natural, such as wanting to be safe after death or wanting to belong to a group. Others may now seem obscure and can be better understood as *manipulations*. Examples of manipulations include the inculcation of severe guilt for minor behaviors, and the obstruction of alternatives. (Manipulations are discussed in the following chapter.)

This chapter explores a number of the motivations behind religious commitment, with the aim of helping you understand and thus to accept and

forgive yourself. Hopefully, you will come to see the past as an important experience. You can then abandon judgment and develop a generous compassion for yourself.

Later in this book, we will also examine the strengths gained from religious involvement. While there may have been significant damage, it may also be true that you have grown as a result of this involvement. Appreciating this can provide a foundation for further growth.

Family and Social Pressures

I was completely surrounded by a religious worldview. I was converted when I was four years old and we always had daily devotions at home. I read my Bible every morning—very strict—and I took it completely seriously. I totally believed that there was a God and Jesus and that the stakes were for eternity and that I had to do the right thing to go to heaven.

— Michael

Becoming a Christian in a Christian family is hardly surprising. It is the view of life that you learn. The family may go to church regularly, talk about religion, read religious books, and have family “devotions.” Certain Christian assumptions are made and certain values are taught. Small children are included in all of this, without any choice in the matter. The family screens reality in a way that determines the children’s perceptions and developing worldview. If the family is active in a church, there is a wider culture that reinforces its views. Until the children are mature enough to question, they grow up thinking that the religion of their environment is the truth.

The influence the family and social group have is more than just that of limiting information. From a child’s point of view, the pressure to conform is tremendous.

Small children are completely dependent on their parents for basic survival—abandonment can mean death. Physical needs, basic safety, and

emotional security is all at risk. As John Bradshaw (1990) a leading writer in the field of recovery, explains, "Every child needs desperately to know that a) his parents are healthy and able to take care of him, and b) that he matters to his parents."

This dependence is why children will sustain their loyalty to parents despite abuse. Rejecting even a truly dangerous family situation is simply not possible to children who usually lack options. In working with clients on recognizing their childhood realities and developing compassion for themselves, I often ask, "What were you supposed to do? Judge your parents as incompetent and go shopping for new ones?" The truth is that children will adjust their views of reality to survive, sustaining a belief in their parents no matter what, because that is all they have. To question is essentially to risk death.

In a fundamentalist family, the religious framework is integral to the parents' reality, which is internalized by the children along with a great many other assumptions and attitudes. (This subject is addressed further in Chapter 6, on families.)

Family influence on religious training does not necessarily result just from parents. John is an example of this. His father was absent from home much of the time and was an alcoholic. John's mother raised three children, struggled with illness, and finally died when he was fourteen. Beginning when John was eleven, his aunt became a much bigger influence and eventually provided a home for him. Her fundamentalist church became the center of John's social activities.

My aunt told me about being born again and emphasized what the Bible had to say. We've all sinned and fallen short of the word of God. And if you believe in Him you shall have eternal life. And I just believed the Bible was true. I was never really taught to question otherwise.

My aunt became another Mom. She started driving me to Sunday school. It was very new to me and I didn't know anybody. I got

invitations from some of the older men who ran the youth groups for me to come out during the week. I was into athletics and they had a lot of games and that appealed to me. Then of course you'd start working on Bible verses; you'd memorize Bible verses and start to get awards and pins and all this stuff.

The fundamentalist Christian family is usually part of a distinct and powerful subculture as well. Like belonging to a family, cultural identification also has a potent survival function. In his writing on intercultural communications, David Hoopes (1981) expresses it this way:

From birth we begin identifying with and affirming that which gives us sustenance—our parents, our families, our culture groups. To believe that one's group is right and must be defended provides or has provided human beings with one of their most effective defenses against the depredations of nature and of other human beings.

Strength lies in the group ... The principle characteristic of the ethnocentric is the relatively blatant assertion of personal and cultural superiority (“my way is the right way”) accompanied by a denigration of other cultures and other ways. The ethnocentric impulse is to divide the world into two parts—us and them (the “we-they” conflict).

The fundamentalist world fits this mindset. It exhibits the characteristics of a *culture*, identified by Hoopes as “customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative style.” Visit a Christian bookstore and you'll see the trappings: books, music, wall decorations, jewelry, and so on. Many “born-again” surround themselves rather defensively with these things.

Religion can also be woven into the fabric of a group's cultural identity more generally. In particular, the church life of African-Americans has been important historically, forming a centerpiece of community life. During slavery days, churches connected the Underground Railroad and later were

central to the civil rights movement. Paul, an African-American, explains how church was part of his life. Leaving the religion was therefore more of a loss:

In a black community, the church is the center of many activities, including day care and political meetings. Everybody in the community was somehow connected. Most of the pastors lived in town and had other jobs. My pastor was also the principal of the junior high school. I went from baseball practice straight to young people's service on Wednesday nights—with my cleats on. The coaches knew about young people's service, so they would adjust practice time so we'd get out at 5:30 and get to church by 6:00.

These family and social forces represent powerful, often subconscious elements that help explain why people become so entrenched in religious groups. As time goes by, the sense of belonging and mattering that results can continue to be very important. Even as you grow older and realize that you have the option of leaving, there are strong reasons for choosing the approval of family and community.

Benefits of the Faith

Sometimes I crave that feeling of safety that being in the fold and following all the rules might bring. It feels cold and lonely out here even though I know that I am psychologically healthier where I am. But I envy my siblings who are still in the fold basking in the sunshine of approval from the church and my parents.

— Margaret

As human beings, we all have essential needs that the fundamentalist system can appear to satisfy. Although a belief system can be “sold” in manipulative ways, it is also important to understand how it can satisfy deep needs. There are definite benefits to religious involvement. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1970) proposed understanding basic

human needs as a hierarchy, beginning with primitive survival needs, or “deficiency needs,” that must be met before we can seek more complex goals, as follows:

- Survival—food, water, and shelter
- Safety—physical and psychological security
- Belonging—love and acceptance
- Self-esteem—approval and recognition

With these needs satisfied, humans can then fulfill their more complex “being needs”:

- Intellectual achievement—understanding and exploring
- Aesthetic appreciation—order, structure, and beauty
- Self-actualization—full realization of one's potential, the process of becoming who you are

The religious and social world of fundamentalism serves to provide for many of these things, particularly for deficiency needs. For some, being needs may also be satisfied to a degree.

In the realm of philosophy, fundamentalism appears to answer many of our most basic and difficult questions. Since the beginning of recorded history, literature has reflected humankind's varied efforts at understanding and coping with the often frightening and painful human condition. In essence, religious systems are masterful attempts to gain some control over our lives. Irving Yalom (1980), psychiatrist and existential humanist, describes four core human dilemmas: death, responsibility, isolation, and meaning. Christian fundamentalism appears to resolve each very neatly, eliminating ambiguity and satisfying a natural, human desire for safety.

There's nothing inherently wrong with meeting human needs. However, in practice these needs are exaggerated and used to frighten potential converts into joining and to preserve existing membership. In fundamentalism, the

dangers of life—both now and in the hereafter—are emphasized. Incredible threats and promises are made for heaven, hell, and miracles here on Earth. The result is that people are disempowered by this approach to having their needs met. Since the source of all the benefits offered is external, requiring dependence on God and the church, internal resources atrophy. This process degrades the self and becomes a serious threat to human well-being.

The following sections describe the attractions of fundamentalism, in more detail; with the aim of helping you recognize those that were most compelling for you. Your awareness of these factors can help you better understand your own motivation.

Safety and Security

Rescued from Death

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. (John 11:2–26)

Perhaps the most pressing concern of human existence is that of mortality. Much of human behavior can be seen as an effort to prolong life and avoid the terror of death. With our advanced language and intellect, we are uniquely able to consider future events, which, although an advantage when it comes to planning positive outcomes, can be a frightening burden as well. Few people are comfortable imagining their own death, decomposition, and disappearance from existence. Being “saved” is a reprieve from confronting one's mortality, which includes aging, disease, and vulnerability. Ultimately, death represents meaninglessness. Author Paul Kurtz in his book *The Transcendental Temptation* (1986) discusses the way death anxiety fuels religious faith. He points out that humans have erected cathedrals and ceremonies and celebrations, all to deny mortal existence and give more to the human drama.

Furthermore, fundamentalism suggests an even worse outcome than physical death—judgment and punishment in the afterlife, a kind of

continuous death. Given this alternative, the offer of salvation is extremely appealing. It is a natural, survival impulse to ask the nobleman's question in Luke 10:25: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Nina described her insight about this motivation in her life:

Part of understanding my journey has been remembering I had a death in my family when I was young. When you think about your own death and you're afraid of being judged at that final moment or it's going to be real painful or frightening, you'll grab onto anything at that point.

Safety in This Life

Safe am I, safe am I
In the hollow of His hand.
Sheltered o'er, sheltered o'er,
With His love forevermore
No ill can harm me
No foe alarm me
For He keeps both day and night
Safe am I, safe am I
In the hollow of His hand.
—Popular church song

Fundamentalist Christianity also promises daily protection from "sin and Satan." The world is considered dangerous with evil rampant. Life is seen as a battle and a struggle. Hence, Paul encouraged the Christians to "Put on the whole armor of God," (Ephesians 6:11) and Peter said to watch out for the devil prowling around like a roaring lion (I Peter 5:8). With the promotion of such fears, it can seem vital to be *saved from every day life*. Given that most people do experience life as challenging, this kind of exaggeration can prove very effective. It takes courage and stamina to deal with the difficulties in this world, and unexpected traumas can be devastating. Who wouldn't like to be excused at such times?

Comforting Christian images include God as a father, Jesus as the good shepherd, and the protective husband. As his sheep, believers are never alone or unsafe. Popular hymns describe safety and security: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”

With God as your protector, the dangers and insecurities of life are not so threatening. All a believer has to do is “trust and obey,” as the song goes. “Lead me on,” says another hymn. Followers are called little sheep or children, needing and deserving protection.

People tend to worry about the future. We want to predict events and circumstances; we would like to have guarantees. Marriage vows, insurance policies, pensions, savings accounts, legal contracts, and oaths of allegiance are all examples of this desire. It is difficult to live with uncertainty and ambiguity, especially if you doubt your ability to handle whatever happens. Fundamentalism preys on the normal concerns people have by painting the world as completely out of control and humans as essentially helpless.

Protection from Self

I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks are to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:18–19, 24, 25)

With fundamentalism, difficult issues in life are made concrete and relatively easy to deal with. For example, you can externalize your internal experience—by projecting good and evil onto such images as Christ, God, and Satan—and thereby simplify the complexity of the psyche. This externalization of the inner experience can decrease your internal struggle and thus produce a feeling of being saved from oneself. Although personal evolution is thwarted, the result is a welcome relief from inner turmoil.

The fundamentalist belief system exploits what may be a natural inclination to escape the challenging work of achieving personal maturity. The self is untrustworthy because of its essential evil and weakness; thus salvation from the *dangerous self* is as absolutely necessary.

Guidance

Escape from Freedom and Responsibility

In the fundamentalist framework, decision-making is a matter of discerning God's will, to the point of looking for God's blueprint for your life. The only clear desire that you are really permitted to have is to love God and do His bidding, as in “Not my will, but thine be done” (Mark 14:36). This can be quite a relief. As great philosophers attest, human freedom is indeed a deeply troubling dilemma. We must make choices. We are responsible for our lives. At the most profound level, our perceptions create our experience. As Yalom (1980) describes it, confronting responsibility can be enormously unsettling. Humans are strangely “doomed to freedom.” Thus, he says, we seek structure, authority, grand designs, magic, something that is bigger than ourselves.

Fundamentalist Christianity relieves the burden of responsibility very thoroughly. When one is “born again” and finds a place in the “family of God,” one's freedom and responsibility are traded for the comfort of following the plan.

Ethics and Morals

On a more concrete level, rigid religions provide guidelines for day-to-day behavior. Ethical and moral directives abound, including in some churches, very specific rules. Given the many choices of lifestyle today and the general loosening of social mores, these guidelines are appreciated by many. For example, it used to be that the larger society clearly frowned on unmarried couples living together. Now that this is more acceptable, many people look to their churches to provide the rule that “living in sin” is

wrong. Numerous other issues are ambiguous today and religion can make it easier for you to decide where you stand.

Making informed choices and assuming responsibility for them can be challenging for any of us. In the fundamentalist framework, guidance often takes the form of “do’s and don’ts”—right and wrong behavior. This can create a sense of safety through set limits, much as a parent provides limits for a child. Individuals who do not trust their own judgment can use religion for self-control and conclude that without it there would be certain disaster. Even as an adult you can get by with avoiding the clear thinking that needs to happen for ethical maturity.

Jerry remembers his youth as a very unstable time when he thinks he was headed for serious problems. Joining the church, in his view, saved him from the pitfalls of the world and his own weakness:

I don't see my experience as entirely negative. I see that, for one thing, I was kept from getting into worse trouble. I don't know what would have become of me if I hadn't become a fundamentalist. As you know, fundamentalists are taught to live a very moral life and to stay away from things like alcohol and drugs and so I never got into those things, which I might have.

Religion is also used to control the behavior of others. Having strict rules for the entire group gives an added degree of security. On a societal level, many believe that religion has provided essential guidelines, without which there would be chaos. Fundamentalists in particular exaggerate the depravity of humankind and paint a negative picture of human beings as selfish and violent.

Because we humans do indeed need some agreements about behavioral limits, it may appear that a divine authority is needed. The neglected point is that people have intuitive knowledge of ethics. They can develop their own codes of behavior and create healthy social contracts. Although this takes courage and hard work, there are many examples of communities that have forged a variety of methods that succeed, and these have been ignored.

Connectedness

Ultimate Intimacy

My Father will love him who loves me, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. (John 14:21)

We all want to be loved and accepted. A longing for unity, for connection, for unconditional love, is a natural desire. Yet as humans we face the existential dilemma of isolation—the condition of being ultimately alone in spite of our many relationships. This aloneness can be frightening at a core level so much so that people often avoid awareness of it. The fundamentalist Christian solves this problem by having the ultimate, most intimate connection—a perfect, unending relationship with God:

I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matthew 28:20)
This cosmic sense of relationship is most dramatically described as a personal intimacy with Jesus Christ: comforting, fulfilling, and exciting, like an ideal marriage, culminating in heaven with the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). Christian hymns are sometimes love songs, like “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” and “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.”

Family of God

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (1 John 3:1–2)

A longing for family is natural. Human infants are totally dependent on the protection and care of their parents. Children need nurturing for physical and emotional survival. A part of every individual, regardless of age, remains childlike and needs caretaking. And since even the best families have some faults, it is understandable when anyone expresses a desire for a better family. Thus it is a powerful idea to be *reborn* into the “*divine family*” where every need is met and one can be a loved and privileged child of God.

Emotionally, many Christians describe their salvation as a kind of homecoming, much like the prodigal son of Jesus' parable. Having a “heavenly father” can give a sense of safety and ultimate belonging. Yet, because everything is spiritualized in this system, very human emotional needs can be masked or obscured. Sheri realized years later how her needs were neglected:

The “God-shaped” void I had may not have been spiritual but, in fact, emotional. I used my faith as I was growing up to fill emptiness. I wouldn't know if I have a spiritual void unless my emotional void was filled first—then see if there's a “leftover” void.

The divine parent also seems to offer guarantees that mortal parents cannot provide, in the present and the future. God the Father sustains a role that children so wish of their parents by being all knowing, all-powerful, and always available. Thus remaining a perpetual child in a cosmic family helps the individual avoid the developmental task all young adults have: to let go of parents and face their limits and mortality. You can refuse to grow up and feel justified about it.

The desire for family is even more intense in people who have had painful or unsatisfactory family experiences. In such a family, basic needs can go unmet, sometimes with profound implications. The family of God is then very seductive, and “brothers and sisters in Christ” can fulfill a real need. In Peter's case, the emotional emptiness of his home made him eager to escape into a different reality:

My mother was always very distant, off in her own world someplace, never touched us much or seemed to care about our feelings or thoughts. And my father did not even come to dinner most of the time but sat in front of the TV drinking beer.

I substituted for the lack of attention from them by going to this fundamentalist church. I was the only person my age that was with them, so I got a great deal of attention. My religion became

my whole life. It filled an emotional vacuum; it gave me a sense of purpose. It was the happiest time of my life.

Belonging

While some are more reclusive than others, most people have a need for acceptance and belonging in a social circle. Especially in these current times of mobility and scattered kinship groups, there can be a great lack of, and desire for community. When you are “born again,” you can gain membership in a very big, but exclusive, club. The “fellowship of believers,” or the “body of Christ,” can be an incredible social support system.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do well to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)

Fundamentalist Christians constitute a full-blown subculture with a common language, belief system, and behavioral code. As with other subcultures, but even more so, it can be very comforting for members to find safety and understanding so widely. Within a denomination particularly, believers can travel to new places and fit in to a church community immediately. Evangelicals worldwide share a purpose that unites them. In addition, every church or Bible group can be a social group with all the benefits of a community. As in a small town, people often know each other and can feel like they matter. Members can escape the anonymity of the world. There are often roles for everyone—in the music program, the youth group, Sunday school, community service, day care program, and so on. Many churches sponsor events that are primarily social—soup suppers, Christmas caroling, youth outings.

The routine of church attendance can also give structure and stability to life. Church groups provide both rituals and support for life transitions like baptism, marriage, and death. The church community can be very important at these times of need, while the idea of being alone or ostracized can be

particularly frightening. Lasting friendships are often formed in church or Sunday school.

In the charismatic variety of fundamentalism, church meetings can be almost party like, with exuberant singing, dancing, and speaking in tongues. Shared hugs and tears, testimonials, and prayers provide great emotional release and bonding. One former charismatic describes her experience as a child at summer camp this way:

I had my first “mountain-top” religious experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. My cousin and my friend and I—and most of the other girls in our cabin—had this ecstatic, tearful filling of the Spirit and were sanctified, according to fundamentalist doctrine. We were suddenly in love with the old preacher, each other, and everyone else! We talked all night and tried to convince the “leftover” girls in our cabin to do the same.

I encouraged Debbie to go the altar to be filled with the Holy Ghost, which she did while I accompanied her. Everyone went forward and cried and hugged each other. The girls in the cabin prayed, cried, and hugged. Debbie and I swore we were best friends forever, snuggled, and talked in the top bunk. We giggled so much no one could shut us up.

Meaning

I remember in high school going out on the back porch of our house at night and looking up at the sky and feeling this oneness with God, thinking that he was really there. It gave meaning to life, I think. You could see that your life here on Earth was really part of a great high-stakes game and that the consequences were tremendous, and it gave you a meaning to your life.

— Terry

Cosmic Coherence

For centuries, philosophers have questioned whether the universe can be random and meaningless. Existentialists have eloquently described the terrifying idea of an indifferent cosmos in which the individual is merely an accident without significance. For someone disturbed by such angst, religion can offer meaning and purpose. It says the world is not chaotic after all, that there is an underlying order that explains everything, a cosmic coherence that makes everything seem reasonable.

Intellectual ambiguity can be very uncomfortable. It is always easier to be sure of something. A religion that neatly provides all the answers saves you the frustration and anxiety that inevitably accompany a struggle with difficult questions. Fundamentalism is especially dogmatic and detailed in describing a grand scheme. The Bible is offered as the inerrant word of God, revealing the path of history, a *plan of salvation*, and predictions about the future. Reasons and justifications are given. And for any questions that still remain, there is the ultimate comfort that comes with trusting that a benign father God has everything under control.

In addition to the emotional comfort of a religious system is the aesthetic satisfaction of a universe that reflects a grand design. According to Maslow, one of our needs is for “order, structure, and beauty.” Finding the supposed Answer to life can feel like getting the solution to a difficult puzzle.

Daniel was raised in a religion that did not provide a clear framework of belief or many guidelines. After high school, he studied at a center for the study of Christian apologetics in England founded by a leading fundamentalist intellectual. For a bright young man seeking a sense of order, the setting seemed perfect:

The thought of the world being as dark and chaotic as some people think it is was horrifying for me. I was tired of the chaos that I had experienced. I was very anxious to find a basis for a moral order. So I was very glad when I found something that seemed to be a solid basis for morality. I was dissatisfied with the

relativism that was prevalent, at least at my high school, a sort of chaos and self-indulgence. I was definitely reacting against that.

When you believe in the fundamentalist master plan, you no longer have to face the challenge of creating meaning through your own choices and perceptions. In Christian fundamentalism, God's purpose is revealed, and you can find a place in it. Put most simply, your purpose is to be saved and to help save others. This is straightforward and significant, making other lifestyles seem pale in comparison.

Stimulation and Escapism

A passionate commitment to religious faith can provide excitement and drama in life. Evangelicals love stories of smuggling Bibles into Communist countries, conversions of drug addicts, and amazing cures. Experiences of glossolalia (speaking in tongues), being "slain in the spirit," or prophesying can be exciting. In daily living, many things can be seen as signs from God. The idea of life as a "walk with God" makes it eventful and special.

Kurtz (1986) argues that religions appeal to those who want to transcend ordinary reality.

Incompatible with the world they encounter, they find that it is too little; they yearn for deeper mysteries and truths, for the promise or hope that there is an unseen dimension to existence ... Today, as of old, we face the same conflict ... the courage to become versus the secret longing not to have to do so.

For those deeply immersed in religion, it becomes an escape from the world. As described by Father Leo Booth (1991) the religious addict uses heavy church attendance and religious behavior as an avoidance of life. The payoffs are real and addicting. Furthermore, the believer can look forward to the ultimate future payoff—a promise of blissful paradise in heaven when God will wipe away all tears and the lion will lie down with the lamb

(Revelation 7:16, 17; Isaiah 11:6). This is a truly beautiful dream that we would all like to believe.

Self-Acceptance

Accepting Christ as personal savior can actually be a way of finding self-acceptance. You are taught that salvation means that you are forgiven, clean, and acceptable to God. This external stamp of approval enables you to approve of yourself. Clearly this has an enormous payoff. The effect can be life changing. From a psychological point of view, the impact is due to self-acceptance, which is often hard to achieve in life. For the born again Christian, the change is *attributed* to the conversion experience.

The Christian message is also one of being *personally* loved and accepted, thus adding to this good feeling. Jesus told the story of a shepherd who leaves a hundred sheep to search for the one that was lost. He returns rejoicing, with the sheep on his shoulder. Jesus said a lost sinner returning to the fold will bring great rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:3—7). Such love and concern for one individual!

The parable of the prodigal son exemplifies the special love given to a repentant sinner. The loving father forgives all and honors his returning son, treating him like a precious being (Luke 15:22—24). The son has not done anything to earn approval; in fact, he has been quite imperfect. At the deepest level, all of us want to be valued for simply *being*, instead of *doing*. We want unconditional love.

Modern, nonfundamentalist theologians, such as Paul Tillich, have interpreted the meaning of the Christian gospel in these terms. Tillich (1948) expressed it this way:

It is as if a voice were saying: “You are accepted ... Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!” If that happens to us, we experience grace ... everything is transformed.

This is a powerful experience, even though it is unfortunately interpreted by the fundamentalist as external approval only. Since it depends on God and

does not translate to true self-worth based on inherent goodness, if you leave the belief system, you lose your acceptance. The acceptance is always understood as being vicariously earned through Christ's atonement. The message is *not* "You are acceptable as you are and have always been." The doctrine of original sin still predominates, and you will always be considered a sinner, albeit "washed in the blood." The bargain is to admit your sinfulness and then be accepted. For many people eager to be free of self-loathing, this is a bargain indeed. They are willing to accept the whole package deal of religious dogma that the church requires in order to get the relief of such a reprieve.

Self-Importance

Becoming born again can also be seen as a way of being saved from insignificance. While you must first admit to being a helpless sinner, you are then given the status of child of God. Since Christ is the King and will one day rule heaven and earth, you become a part of this royal family, an heir, and destined for glory (Romans 8:15-17). In fundamentalist theology, Christians are the "elect," the chosen people, favored by God just as the Jews were in the Old Testament.

They will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:30–31)

Being right while others are wrong can be very satisfying. It is a way to feel safe and superior. Thus various religions and different sects within fundamentalist Christianity each claims to have the ultimate doctrinal truth. Despite the strife and anxiety that this produces, many are motivated to find security and self-importance by being right. In fact, more people have died in holy wars throughout history than in any other kind of war. Even Christians who decry violence will secretly enjoy the belief that inequities in this life will be settled in the hereafter. In the process of spreading a gospel of love, the Bible says to dust off your feet if your words are not

received, trusting God to punish in the manner of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:14–15). If you are in the Christian family, you get to have God as your big brother, ready to hurt anyone who hurts you. This is a potent and vicious fantasy of specialness, sufficient probably to comfort the most downtrodden.

Since indeed God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thessalonians 1:6–8)

Mystical Experience

For some Christians, the most meaningful and persuasive aspect of faith is their private spiritual experience. The Christian methods of prayer and devotion and certain group practices can bring about altered states of consciousness. These experiences can be intensely satisfying, and of course they are always interpreted according to Christian dogma. There is no recognition of the similar experiences described by people in a wide variety of settings, religious and otherwise. The mystical experience is taken to be proof of the Christian belief system.

The mystical experience culminates in a tremendous burst of passionate and emotional fulfillment. This involves the opening of the heart, and arousal of love. There is supposedly a “union” in the sense that the soul of the mystic, as it were, melts away or becomes fused with the divine, flowing into God as God flows into the soul. There is often an allusion to an intense and shimmering light, which suffuses the mind and being of the person and dominates everything. Out of this experience emerges an indescribable joy, a sense of bliss, ecstatic happiness, a buoyant experience of peace, and an inner sweetness. (Kurtz 1986)

Mystics throughout the ages have described mystical experience in terms fairly similar to what Kurtz uses, although Eastern religions do not emphasize a personal union with a supreme being. The most important feature is a perceived unity to all things, a profound sense of oneness with the universe. The experience of traditional Christian mysticism Kurtz describes can be experienced in the fundamental context, particularly at a time of being “saved” or “baptized in the Holy Spirit.”

Social Cause

Some people find meaning by joining with others to work for a common goal. They want to rise above their own individual concerns and be of service to others, finding some way to contribute to the world. Membership in a religious group can provide such an opportunity. The attraction of group involvement may be stronger for those who struggle with personal meaning as individuals. In his classic analysis, *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer (1951) examines the psychology of all mass movements, both religious and political. One of his conclusions is that joining a group provides new self-esteem and purpose for someone who has failed in life. When the present is spoiled, hope for the future is a seductive lure.

Their innermost craving is for a new life—a rebirth—or, failing this, a chance to acquire new elements of pride, confidence, hope, a sense of purpose and worth by identification with a holy cause. An active mass movement offers them opportunities for both.

Power

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. (Acts 1:8)

Fundamentalism promises mastery in life, not just safety but dominance. In the face of external odds and internal struggles, humans are understandably attracted to power. The sincere Christian aspires to being “victorious” over sin and achieving the “abundant life.” The source of power is external, that is, from God, achieved through belief in Jesus Christ.

Power is a primary theme in the worship rituals of many churches. I once made a content analysis of hymns sung in fundamentalist churches, expecting a majority of songs to be about love and praise. It turned out that power was by far the dominant subject, exemplified by such hymns as “All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name” and “Onward Christian Soldiers.” (Interestingly the second most frequent theme was safety.)

Victory Over Outside Threat

Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. (Luke 10:19)

In the fundamentalist view of the world, there is a tremendous and continuous battle going on between good and evil. Even though God is present and will win in the end, the forces of darkness led by Satan are formidable. They are considered stronger than ordinary human strength. Therefore the help of God is always necessary. God and Satan are perceived to be constantly fighting over the souls of human beings.

This imagery can be seen as an exaggeration of the effort we all make to cope with the world. All humans desire and strive for a sense of mastery, competence, and control. Helplessness and hopelessness are intolerable conditions. Thus the appeal of power in religion taps a deep-seated human drive. Many believers are also attracted to the promise of supernatural power to perform miracles. “All things are possible,” sounds pretty exciting.

Ultimately, the fundamentalist faith promises power over others at the final battle of Armageddon. Rather than fostering a spirit of mutual help and cooperation, this religion seems to evoke the most basic survival instincts and aggressions. The book of Revelation presents images of a bloody final battle between good and evil, in which the final judgment divides the sheep from the goats, the saved from the unsaved, with no room for equivocation or ambiguity. This is a system of absolute black and absolute white. A

spectacular military victory is promised to those on God's side, and loyal believers are entitled to a share in the glory.

For the person who thrives on overpowering others, the Jesus of Revelation offers an attractive scenario:

He who conquers and who keeps my word until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my father; and I will give him the morning star. (Revelation 2:26–27)

Personal Power

People naturally want to be happy with their lives and with who they are. In fundamentalism, the salvation promise includes this. You can expect to be a “new creature” in Christ, enjoy the “peace that passes all understanding,” and have spiritual fruits and gifts.

But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22–23)

This is especially attractive because, unlike religions that expect you to engage in a spiritual discipline such as meditation, you are not asked to do anything. In fundamentalism, there is no understanding of character *development*, only miraculous transformation due to God's grace. Rather than attending to the process of self-awareness and personal growth, you simply channel the Holy Spirit in your life. Being happy and being a good person are due to the power of God—an appealing shortcut.

Exercise 3.1: Motivational Inventory

The motivations for religious involvement described above constitute only a general list. Social pressures vary in strength, and any given person's motivation will be stronger in some areas than in others. I have worked with individuals who had had a permissive upbringing and a wild adolescence

who then became attracted to the controlling aspects of Christianity. Others felt a strong need for the emotional comfort and sense of belonging. Still others enjoyed the aspect of cosmic purpose and intellectual tidiness.

The following checklist is an aid to making an inventory of your own individual reasons for having become involved in your religion. If you were raised in it, think about why you stayed in and what it did for you at the time. Begin by reading the following statements and rating how important each benefit was in your religious life. That is, rate each benefit according to how important it was in satisfying pressures, meeting your needs, or fulfilling your desires.

Benefits Checklist

Benefit	Importance
Approval from my family	1 2 3 4 5
Approval from society	1 2 3 4 5
Salvation from eternal death	1 2 3 4 5
Safety in this life	1 2 3 4 5
Protection from myself	1 2 3 4 5
Guidance for my life decisions	1 2 3 4 5
Ethical and moral structure	1 2 3 4 5
Emotional intimacy with God	1 2 3 4 5
Sense of belonging in God's family	1 2 3 4 5
Community and cultural identification	1 2 3 4 5
Sense of meaning and purpose in life	1 2 3 4 5
Stimulation and drama	1 2 3 4 5
Self-acceptance and self-importance	1 2 3 4 5
Mystical, spiritual experience	1 2 3 4 5
Participation in a social cause	1 2 3 4 5

Victory over the world and life

1 2 3 4 5

Personal power to be happy and good

1 2 3 4 5

Directions: For each item, mark the number that best reflects the attraction that aspect of your faith had for you. For example, mark 1 if the benefit was mildly important to you, 3 if it was moderately important, and 5 if it was very important. Mark 2 or 4 if the issue falls somewhere in between.

Writing exercise: Now take the insights you gained by working through the checklist and write about this part of your life. Try to write this as a compassionate, non-judgmental autobiography. You could make it an essay entitled “What I Have Liked About My Religion,” written from a child’s simple, honest viewpoint.

Don’t feel you have to do this all in one sitting. You can continue working on it for days or weeks, adding to it as you gain new insights from reading this book and thinking about the implications of what you have learned.

Exercise 3.2: Meeting Current Needs

Basic human needs are natural. As you inventoried your motivations for religious involvement, you probably became more clear about your current needs as well as you past ones. Your strongest needs now may be different from those in the past. For example, you may have felt a strong need for guidance on ethics and morals in the past, which has now waned, but you find community to be of continuing importance. Your need for approval from family may have declined greatly and shifted instead to a greater need for approval from yourself.

For this exercise, go back to the Benefits Checklist and, using a different method of marking, rate each benefit in terms of how important it is for meeting your needs now.

Writing exercise: Part of your healing work will be to find new ways of meeting your needs – ways that are more healthy and satisfying for you than your religion was. This will involve taking responsibility for yourself

and being creative with new possibilities. At first, this task may seem overwhelming.

So for now, choose just a few of the important needs on your list and write down some ideas of new methods for meeting them. For example, if you still have a need for social support, where else might you find it? As you work through this book and continue to grow, you can add your thoughts to this list and begin to take action to meet your current needs. At this stage, do not feel pressured to have answers to these items; this is an ongoing process.

1. Thoughts about meeting my current need for _____.

2. Thoughts about meeting my current need for _____.

3. Thoughts about meeting my current need for _____.

4. Thoughts about meeting my current need for _____.

Afterword

Although they were familiar already, in writing this book I had to look up the verses I quoted from the Bible to get the wording exact. As I did this, I gradually became aware of interesting feelings. I found myself turning the delicate pages of the Bible with care and affection, the way I did many years ago. The pages felt precious as I smoothed them out. I read whole

chapters in the Gospel of John, and was moved by the words of Jesus at the Last Supper.

Suddenly I recognized my experience. It was like reading old letters from a lover I had left. The old bond was still present, the feelings of attachment and love, and a wave of sadness, a strange sense of betrayal. Here I was quoting my old love to build my arguments.

“But it's okay,” I told myself, “This is only part of what I am saying.” Whoever he is, it's okay that I still love him. Whoever he or she is, telling the truth is important for both of us.

Chapter 4

Recognizing Manipulations

They quoted the scripture about the camel that can't get through the eye of a needle, so even one little sin can't get into heaven. So even though I was a real good kid, every time that I thought anything bad or felt anything that I thought was bad or did anything that somebody else thought was bad, I automatically thought that if I died at that moment, I'd go to hell. Even though I had already accepted Jesus and went to church and did everything I was supposed to do. I had nightmares and was always anxious. I went up to the altar all the time to ask forgiveness.

— Charlotte

Rigid religions are not just attractive, they are manipulative. Many religious teachings take advantage of the needs explored in the last chapter, exploiting them to enforce conformity to the group.

There are many methods of persuasion that are known to be powerful. These techniques have received attention in the areas of political brainwashing and cult mind control. In the religious arena, some of these methods are deliberately used for recruitment and retention of members. Some other dynamics are less deliberate, but no less effective. Group members can be so brainwashed themselves that they are unconscious of perpetuating mind control techniques in indoctrinating others.

In his enlightening book, *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, (1988), Steve Hassan, a former follower of Sun Myung Moon, describes techniques common to many groups. He points out that people resist taking this subject seriously because we want to believe we are rational, in control, and making our own choices. Thinking that other people can control your mind is scary. Yet it is true that deceptive techniques can be and are used to

unduly influence people's choices. These influences can be enough to affect even the most intelligent and strong individuals.

In this chapter, I address the aspects of fundamentalism that are mentally and emotionally manipulative. Since fundamentalism is largely accepted as a part of mainstream culture in America, many people do not recognize the elements of mind control that are present. Yet many techniques are identical to those used by cults, and people can be seriously damaged by them.

As you read about the types of mind control used in fundamentalist Christianity, you may have a variety of thoughts and feelings. You might feel defensive about your own involvement or that of the church leaders that you knew. It is true that many religious people are well intentioned. They are meeting their own needs in the best way they can, and they often have good motives for recruiting others. The techniques described in this chapter are sometimes intentionally manipulative but often are not. The believer usually colludes with the system because she or he *wants* to believe. Understanding how mind control mechanisms work is about insight, not blame. It's about reclaiming your power to make your own intelligent choices.

Fear Manipulations

Eternal Damnation

The most powerful technique of fundamentalism is a terror tactic. Fundamentalism teaches the existence of hell, a place of eternal torment. If you do not believe in Jesus Christ as your personal savior, you are doomed. Some describe hell as a place of outer darkness, void of God's presence. The idea is that if you do not want to be close to God, then you simply get what you have chosen. Even other, nonfundamentalist Christians are considered lost.

This appeal capitalizes on the natural fear people have of death, making it much worse with horrible images of everlasting torture. “Fire-and-brimstone” preachers have long known the power of such an approach.

Especially for children, with their vivid imaginations and unclear notions of reality, the imagery of a fiery hell is intensely frightening. (A parent threatening a child with such tortures *before* death can easily be seen as abusive.) But fundamentalist preachers have no shame about describing with relish the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” that God will mete out to sinners.

The fear of hell is frequently powerful enough to keep a person trying to conform. If the salvation formula was tried but no dramatic effects were felt, a follower might answer many “altar calls,” repeating the ritual and trying to believe. Evangelists often threaten people by suggesting they imagine a sudden accidental death, perhaps in an accident on their way home from the meeting. The fear is kept alive as everyone constantly speculates about whether they are ready to meet their maker. And, as if the danger of Satan weren't enough, God is a source of fear as well, often portrayed as jealous and vengeful in the Bible. Jesus said: “But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:5). Or as Susan put it:

What do you have to be saved from? Well, as it turns out, if you follow all the writings to their end, you have to be saved from God. Whose holy prison is this?

Within fundamentalism, there are those who believe a doctrine of “once saved, always saved,” also called “eternal security.” This means that once you are born again, you are permanently a part of God's family. You cannot be unborn. If you backslide and stray from the fold, you will eventually return because Jesus the good shepherd will seek you out and bring you back.

The anxiety of this doctrine is determining whether you were ever truly saved. Especially for those whom did not have a dramatic experience of rebirth, this belief is not much comfort. Believers work hard at making their salvation “take” and blame themselves for not believing enough or not being humble enough to be accepted. This problem is especially relevant to

children of fundamentalists. Since they inherited their belief system, they often have not had a distinct conversion experience. Or if they have, there is no lasting evidence that salvation has definitely taken place. Sally describes the experience this way:

When I was five, I asked Jesus into my heart. But I worried that it didn't take effect, that God didn't hear me, that my faith wasn't good enough. Never once did I feel secure in my Christianity, never. I felt like my experience of Christianity was never real, and I *tried*.

The other side of this doctrinal issue is the “holiness” camp. These groups believe that a believer must be faithful. One's place among the saved can be lost. The idea is that salvation is a continuous process, based on the Apostle Paul's admonition to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). They say that God wants loyalty; sending Jesus to die on the cross was an immense gift. So believers cannot simply do whatever they like, dishonor God, and expect to walk into heaven.

As can be expected, fundamentalists in this camp experience anxiety about their daily lives. Thoughts and behaviors must be acceptable at all times because there is the ever-present danger of going past the line into damnation. They still believe God will forgive sin, so regular repentance is important. However, the rules are fuzzy; no one knows where the line is. Furthermore, many believe it is not enough just to not sin; you must be “on fire” for God. In Revelation 3:16 Jesus is quoted saying “Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.” So believers worry about not having enough enthusiasm. Yet no one knows what “lukewarm” really means.

A related form of fear induction is especially powerful. *Apostasy* refers to a lost state resulting from rejecting the faith or “sinning against the Holy Spirit.” It means that even if you want to return to the fold, you cannot; you have sinned so severely that *you cannot* be forgiven. This subject is one that

is debated in Christian circles, but the idea is a frightening one for believers to consider.

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. (Hebrews 6:4–6)

This and other verses serve to keep believers worried and conforming. When does mere doubt constitute apostasy? Blaspheming the Holy Spirit is also said to be unforgivable (Matthew 12:31), but since it is never defined, believers are confused and anxious. Rather than take a life-threatening chance, believers take pains to remain faithful and suppress unorthodox thinking. To do so, however, can require a highly developed “tunnel vision”—forcing all outside information to fit the framework or be denied. Different churches and denominations come up with behavioral guidelines (some of which are as obsessive and isolationist as forbidding TV and movies, mixed bathing, and women’s haircuts), but the ever-present ambiguity leaves people hopping with anxious obedience.

In essence, the Christian can never feel totally secure, even with the promise of salvation. As in other controlling situations (such as under a totalitarian regime), it’s extremely effective to keep people slightly off balance, with not enough information and in danger. The stress makes people more loyal and conscientious.

Apocalypse

A major teaching in fundamentalism is that the world will soon end cataclysmically with the Second Coming of Christ. Bible prophecies are compared with world events to provide evidence. Doomsday preachers talk about “wars and rumors of wars,” earthquakes, the establishment of Israel as a nation, and the European Economic Community as the ten-horned

beast. The Soviet Union was considered Gog, the country to the north expected to invade Israel. Saddam Hussein was suspected of being the Antichrist because of his efforts to restore ancient Babylon, a city that figures hugely in the events of Revelation. Fundamentalist writer, Charles Dyer (1991) wrote *The Rise of Babylon*, which Christian bookstores sold like hotcakes during the Gulf War.

All of these “signs” are used as threats to get with the program. Most preachers agree that no one can “know the day or the hour,” but they still use apocalyptic images to pressure new followers. They like to quote Jesus saying he is coming soon, when least expected. Jesus compared his second coming to a thief in the night and said to keep watch and be ready (Matthew 24:36–51). Even for the believer, the feeling is ominous, requiring vigilance lest you be left behind.

According to the dominant view, Christians will be “raptured” off the earth and the rest of the world will experience seven years of intense tribulation under the Antichrist. Then Jesus will come back with all his saints and fight the battle of Armageddon, culminating in a millennium of Christ’s rule on Earth. Finally, all will be judged and either go to heaven or burn in the lake of fire.

The frightening part is that the first event will happen suddenly, “in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.” Anticipating the rapture can create intense anxiety for the believer who is not absolutely sure of salvation. The other metaphor in the Bible is that of the Flood in Noah's day. In that story, people were busy making merry when they were suddenly swept away. The implication is that you must not relax. You should live in fear about being right with God at all times. Especially for a small child, this can be terrifying.

Another unfortunate aspect of this end-times focus is its effect on thinking about the future. The impact on political issues, such as environmental concern and peace making, is profound. Fundamentalists are generally unmotivated to better the world because they see it as doomed. In fact,

believers are often excited when war breaks out, particularly in the Middle East, because it could mean “the end” at last. For an individual, personal life planning can be negatively affected. As Cindy expressed it:

I was always lonely and afraid because I believed doomsday was coming any moment that within the twinkling of an eye the world would end because Christ was coming back. I never thought about a future, or saving money, or getting an education, because I didn't think I would reach old age.

Isolation and Vulnerability

Phobia about the present world is also used as a control mechanism. Not only will you be damned in the afterlife, but also if you are not saved you will have a miserable existence in the here and now. In testimonial meetings, new converts stress the contrast between their previous lives of sin and their new lives as Christians. The most moving stories are ones describing severe conditions of depravity and hopelessness—drug addiction, crime, suicidal depression, and other scenarios of desperation. If you were raised a Christian, you were led to believe that this is how your life would be without Christ. The world is an evil place that will eat you up. Even Christians with little life experience talk with fear about life outside the fold, about how horribly depressing or meaningless life would be. The group reinforces these imagined situations, making them seem more real and frightening.

People normally are afraid of the unknown to some extent. This tactic preys on such anxiety, creating an actual *phobia*—a generalized and exaggerated fear of imaginary conditions. Group members absorb negative images of never being happy or successful outside the group. Hassan (1988) discusses this same means of control in cult environments:

The most powerful technique for emotional control is phobia indoctrination. People are made to have a panic reaction at the thought of leaving: sweating, rapid heartbeat, and intense desire to avoid the possibility. They are told that if they leave they will

be lost and defenseless in the face of dark horrors: they'll go insane, be killed, become drug addicts, or commit suicide.

An important aspect of this indoctrination is a literal belief in Satan and his legions of demons. As a Christian, the “blood of Christ” is supposed to protect you, and you have the Word as a sword. Thus if you leave the faith, you can feel very vulnerable, to the point of having terrifying nightmares or delusions.

Shame

Another deterrent to leaving the faith is the implication that if you leave the faith, it is because you couldn't cut it, weren't serious enough, humble enough, good enough. The gospel was wasted on you, like “pearls before swine.” As Jerry put it:

For me, for the longest time, I felt to leave it would be cowardly. It would prove that I was an evil and bad person. If I couldn't do the things they said, there was something wrong with me.

People who leave are assumed to be interested in sin. Years ago, I asked a relative why she'd never wanted to know why I left the faith. I was shocked to hear her say, “Well, all the people I've known who left the church wanted to go back to their old ways—sleep around or do drugs and not feel guilty.” Part of the control mechanism is *shaming*. The Bible verse quoted is graphic and disgusting, comparing a person who leaves the fold to a dog turning back to his own vomit (2 Peter 2:17–22).

Guilt Manipulations

Christ's Death

How many times have you heard that Christ died for you for your sins? This is a heavy responsibility, especially for children. The guilt induction can vary in intensity, depending how the message is presented, but the bottom line is that the Son of God had to come to Earth and die a horrible death because of our failings. The Catholic tradition includes bloody

crucifixes and in some cultures, parades through the streets reenacting the walk to Calvary. Fundamentalists do not usually employ these visual aids, but the message is the same. A potential convert must confess to being a sinner. The first step toward salvation is this “conviction of sin,” that is, responsibility for Christ's death.

This is a powerful technique because everyone who has a conscience is capable of feeling bad for errors and misdeeds, however minor. In the religious framework, impure thoughts are considered sins too. The suffering of Christ is emphasized, without consideration or comparison with the suffering of other human beings. (In reality, many others have suffered worse deaths, often for good causes.)

Responsibility for Others

Once you are saved, you are taught that your duty is to spread the gospel to others, or else their destiny is at least partially your fault. This mission to evangelize is often presented as your only reason for remaining on earth. If you do not feel concern for others and work for their salvation, your own place in the fold is questionable. As a Christian, it is easy to live with perpetual guilt about this problem, and this is especially painful for the shy person or one struggling with doubts.

Guilt about others serves to sustain the group. The effect of proselytizing is to reaffirm and strengthen a belief system. The psychological term that applies is *cognitive dissonance*. Humans need to experience internal consistency. You cannot repeatedly say one thing and believe something else without being very uncomfortable, without experiencing dissonance. Therefore, if you are preaching a certain message out of obligation, the easiest thing is to believe what you're saying. “Witnessing” is a way of convincing *yourself* on a regular basis. John did this quite deliberately.

I passed out tracts because I think it helped me believe in a system I had doubts about. It was one way to confirm my feelings.

Churches that use guilt to get people to witness have a powerful means of retaining membership. Some groups are very effective with guilt to get financial support for various ministries and missionaries. But the ultimate trick is using the idea of others' being lost in hell because *you didn't tell them about Jesus!* Preachers like to produce guilt by using the imagery of having blood on your hands, loosely derived from this verse:

If I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked, in order to save his life, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. (Ezekiel 3:18–19)

Sin and Perfectionism

We know that any one born of God does not sin. (I John 5:18)
Despite the redemption promised by Christ's sacrifice, Christians are expected to live lives free of sin. This is not possible, of course, since so much is considered sin. Therefore you must continuously repent and receive God's grace. Each time you "sin," you are to acknowledge again your incompetence and gratefully ask for forgiveness. And because you cannot achieve perfection, you live with some level of guilt all the time.

The notion of personal responsibility in fundamentalism is a curious one. You are responsible for your sins, but you cannot take credit for the good things that you do. Any good that you do must be attributed to God working through you. Yet you must try to be Christ like. When you fail, it is *your fault* for not "letting the power of God work in you." This is an effective double bind of *responsibility* without *ability*. Laura described the cycle of guilt and confession that she experienced as a child:

The most popular girls in school accepted me and taught me how to dance. I felt guilty. Susan and I went roller-skating at a teenage hangout in seventh grade. We flirted with the boys, tried smoking cigarettes, and listened to rock and roll. The popular group was doing a skit for a talent show. As I was practicing to be the

bartender *selling alcohol*, one afternoon, I felt guilty and quit. Of course, I wasn't in the popular crowd anymore.

At the camp meeting I felt guilty for following the crowd and popular thinking, not standing up for my religious convictions, sassing my mother, masturbating, getting angry, you name it. So I rededicated my life to Jesus (what else is there after being filled with the Holy Spirit?), shedding tears all over the altar when I went forward for the invitation, and had another big catharsis.

Christians are also made to feel guilty when they focus on their own priorities. It is seen as wrong and sinful to be aware of your feelings, honor your intuitions, or seek to meet your needs. You should be above this kind of selfishness and consider God first and then the group. But, since people naturally have needs and feelings, sincere Christians who want to avoid guilt must, in essence, annihilate themselves. This makes for more cooperative adherents.

The pattern of indulgence and then remorse illustrated by Laura compares to the behavior of an alcoholic or otherwise addicted individual. The religious addict is attached to the benefits of religion—the sense of righteousness, the social approval, and the emotional comfort—and yet is tempted to explore the forbidden. Because of pressure to stay on the straight and narrow path, decisions to deviate are made impulsively. Then the fear of consequences sets in and the cycle continues with shame and confession. The individual is thus trying to live two lives, engaging in the psychological pattern of “splitting.” Physical symptoms such as backaches, headaches, and sleeplessness can result.

In his book *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction and Abuse*, Episcopalian priest Father Leo Booth (1991) compares intense religiosity with other addictive patterns in individuals and families. While the analogy is a stretch at times (since religion does not have all the same effects as a substance and can stem from different motivations), Booth makes some compelling points. He says that the black-

and-white, either-or thinking tends to preclude alternative ways of living because they would be blasphemous:

However, the adult child of the religious addict lives in this world and he sees another way to live, while at work and on television, in books and magazines or from friends. Occasionally he tries to live in both worlds, enjoying the worldliness of work and friendships, but also returning to the “righteousness” of home. This conflict leads to confusion, self-loathing and an eventual loss of control. Isolation, physical and mental breakdowns, drug abuse, eating disorders, sexual acting-out and violent outbursts of anger could arise—always followed by guilt, shame, and fear of God's Judgment.

Mystical Manipulations

Altered States

We have all heard stories of cult groups creating environments in which recruits are led to altered or trance states through practices such as fasting, chanting, and sleep deprivation. Robert Lifton (1987) includes this in his list of mind control methods because members conclude that it has happened spontaneously, for mystical reasons, and because of the spiritual power of the cult leader, who mediates directly with God.

In Christian churches, this kind of mystical manipulation also happens. Church services often include ritualized group processes that can induce trance states. Music, prayers, and a mesmerizing preaching style can create a state of relaxation and suggestibility. When a congregation proceeds to sing and pray aloud together with enthusiasm and speaking in tongues, an individual can easily conform. The aroused emotions and the group consensus about reality are convincing enough to inspire a response to get saved, “rededicated,” or “filled with the Spirit.”

In the typical evangelical service, after a rousing sermon comes the “altar call.” This routine is strikingly similar to hypnotic induction methods in

other contexts: The key is to get people to focus attention inward rather than outward, so that they see, hear, and feel internally rather than externally, through the five senses. At such times, you are much more susceptible to suggestions and less able to use your critical abilities. After an emotional sermon, which has likely already employed manipulative techniques such as fear and guilt, you are asked to bow your head and close your eyes. Soft music plays while everyone focuses inward. Quiet hymns repeat “Jesus is calling” or “Just as I am.” The minister then speaks softly into the microphone, suggesting that the Holy Spirit is present and moving in the congregation. Feelings are interpreted for you, as “conviction of sin,” “answering His call,” and so forth. With perfected timing, the preacher asks, “Can you hear Jesus knocking on your heart’s door? Won’t you open it today?” You are then asked to raise your hand while keeping your eyes shut; then to get up and come forward. The effect is powerful, carefully orchestrated, and *effective*.

Interpretation of Private Experience

Aside from services, Christians often have private devotional rituals. Prayer can be a highly relaxed and open state of consciousness, producing peacefulness and mental clarity similar to meditation techniques of other cultures. Speaking in tongues privately can also produce heightened arousal and ecstatic feelings. However, in the fundamentalist context, all of these experiences are claimed as *evidence* of the religious doctrine, not simply an experience to be explored. The religion co-opts anything you might consider spiritual, taking your private experience and making it proof of the entire religion. Thus it becomes difficult for the born again Christian with personal mystical experience to leave the faith, because this would seem to be a denial of firsthand evidence. The former believer has been brainwashed to accept everything as a package deal; thus trying to salvage and honor this part of religious experience creates enormous guilt. This manipulation can legitimately be called spiritual abuse.

Symbols, Ritual, and Ceremony

Long-standing traditions lend weight to symbols like the cross and the communion, sometimes to superstitious proportions. In an art show I curated, we included a life-sized cross for people to get up on to explore their feelings. Those that took the opportunity had some interesting insights. But the majority of visitors could not do it. Most were not even Christian, yet the symbol of the cross was so powerful that they were afraid. One of the other artists called it a phobic reaction, and indeed, those who overcame their reluctance, were able to realize the power they had given a symbol.

Churches use a shroud of ritual and ceremony as part of mystical manipulation. The idea of the sacred gives a supernatural authority to their doctrines as well. The Scripture is taught to be divinely inspired; fundamentalists consider it to be literal and inerrant. Quoting passages from the Bible thus has a seemingly mystical power. Miracles are used as evidence of the faith, both in the Bible and in the present. Some of these may have other explanations, but alternatives are not considered. A miracle is used as proof of the entire belief system. Since the faith is a package, the acceptance of a miracle is a demand to accept the entire dogma, as interpreted by religious leaders.

Denigration of Self

In the fundamentalist system, the self must be rejected because it is essentially bad and cannot be trusted. The first step in convincing new converts is to destroy their faith in themselves. Missionaries who confront other cultures begin by convincing people that they are failures and *need God*. Thus it makes sense that people who are struggling with their lives are much more receptive to proselytizing. Hassan (1988) has pointed out that religious recruiters are adept at attracting people who are vulnerable because of great personal stress in their lives. Most people experience feelings of inadequacy at some time; these feelings are then exaggerated and exploited.

The assault on the self goes beyond guilt for sin. If that were the case, most people could reasonably be forgiven by virtue of their own remorse and

willingness to make amends. Few of us deserve to be crucified. The key is that you are considered *fundamentally* wrong and inept, beginning with the doctrine of original sin. Everything about you is flawed, and you desperately need to be salvaged by God.

The damage to self is more than hurt self-esteem. Your confidence in your own judgment is destroyed. As an empty shell, you are then open and vulnerable to indoctrination because you cannot trust your own thinking. Your thoughts are inadequate, your feelings are irrelevant or misleading, and your basic drives are selfish and destructive. You cannot challenge the religious system because your critical abilities are discredited and your intuitions rendered worthless. Illustrating the dependence that is fostered, Jerry Falwell (1982) said, “Start your day off by ridding yourself of self-reliance.”

Adding power to this manipulation is the ever-broadening definition of sin. The definition “falling short of the glory of God,” makes it appear true that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23). While the average person may claim feeling like “a good person,” fundamentalists easily destroy this idea. Christ is used, as the standard of acceptability, so any personal criteria you may have is irrelevant and further proof of your pride and error. When humans are seen as basically unfit to have contact with God, the chasm is huge. You can then be convinced that the plan of salvation through Christ's dramatic intervention is the only solution.

Once you are a believer and no longer have your own mind to rely on, it becomes possible to accept everything you are taught. You can accommodate incredible problems in the religion because you need to avoid cognitive dissonance, as discussed earlier. The stretching of credulity in fundamentalist Christianity is a frequent occurrence. Followers are expected to believe contradictory, nonsensical, and offensive “true stories” in the Bible and church teachings. This serves to strengthen blind adherence because your intuitive reactions have been annihilated. For example, you are supposed to believe you should follow the example of the widow who

harassed the “unjust” judge to avenge her adversary (Luke 18:1–8). God is compared to a wicked and lazy judge and the believer is exhorted to pray marathon-fashion for selfish vengeance. If this were not in the Bible, the Christian would probably consider it blasphemous.

Another humorous, albeit pathetic, example is a common church teaching about the earth's fossil record. The line is that God *created* the supposed evidence of evolution. He planted the dinosaur bones and carbon-14 data in order to test our faith. The test is whether we believe the Word of God in Genesis or allow ourselves to be fooled by the wisdom of the world. That is, would we be so sinful as to trust our perceptions of what we see in front of us? Never is it thought that God's behavior is dishonest and crafty, hardly worthy of a god.

The most serious demand for unquestioned belief is, of course, the atonement. First the believer is to suspend familiar notions of justice, such as punishment of the guilty as opposed to an innocent party. You are then expected to accept the necessity of blood sacrifice for sin; that wrongdoing must be paid for, and not necessarily in proportion to the crime. A father's sacrifice of his innocent son is supposed to be not only just but also generous and wonderful. Then the temporary three-day death of this one person is supposed to wipe out all the wrongdoing and ineptitude of a species. And finally, you should believe that all you need do to erase responsibility for your actions and enter a haven of eternal reward is to believe. It's no wonder that once a convert has wrapped his or her mind around this story, anything can be accepted as truth. The rest of fundamentalist doctrine can be easily swallowed, including Jonah.

(One reason the Christian message works in the West is the sheer familiarity of it. It is a cultural tradition that “Christ died for you.” When missionaries preach to unindoctrinated listeners, the challenging part is explaining the atonement. For those not willing to give up their integrity just yet, the story simply lacks plausibility. People from other cultures have very similar stories in their own mythology.)

Discrediting of the World

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.
(Colossians 2:8)

This imagery of being preyed upon illustrates the paranoia of fundamentalism. With its narrow, tunnel vision, most of human knowledge and activity is rejected.

The world of the fundamentalist does not allow for processing new information from the environment. The “Word of God,” is absolute and unchanging. Thus while secular people think of the human race, and themselves, as individuals, as maturing and evolving, the conservative Christian believes that God has spoken once and for all time. To stay faithful then, the believer must discount worldly knowledge and be shielded from alternative, “ungodly” viewpoints. The more militant believer also finds it necessary to *defend* God from modernism.

The Church (the bride of Christ) is considered the repository of all that is valuable, waiting patiently to be “caught up with Christ.” Believers are to be strangers and pilgrims on Earth, living cautiously among unbelievers who are under Satan's rule. In fact, the entire Earth is seen as fallen and under evil influence, including animals and the natural environment. The Earth is considered a temporary home for humans only, a location for the biblical drama. A popular church song says, “This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through.”

This controlled focus on the spiritual and the afterlife instructs Christians to maintain an aloofness from the world, and to withdraw any emotional investment from worldly affairs. Thus the first reason to discredit the world is because it is simply irrelevant. The things of this world are vastly inferior to “things above.” For the devout Christian longing to be with God, this can amount to a death wish. Taken to the extreme, in cult like groups it can even lead to suicide.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.
(Colossians 3:1–3)

The biblical image of the Christian life that fundamentalists recognize is one of total immersion. Believers are to turn to each other for support and reinforcement of their beliefs. Outsiders are discredited as sources of valid information or enrichment simply by virtue of being unbelievers. The substantive content of anything from a worldly source is immediately suspect, and often dismissed out of hand. Information that *appears good* is especially suspected because believers are taught that Satan can appear as an “angel of light.” Worldly knowledge that seems reasonable is labeled “temptation.”

In this framework, human wisdom is called folly. Even Jesus expressed an attitude of anti-intellectualism, thanking God for hiding truth from the wise and revealing it to babes (Matthew 11:25). The fundamentalist thus develops contempt for most human efforts.

This attitude effectively limits Christians being receptive to instruction only within their closed circle. The world, according to the Bible, is not only irrelevant but also inherently bad. To be involved in the world—to be “worldly”—is sinful. Believers must choose between God and “the world.” This attitude is much more than mere arrogance about a superior way of life; it means taking a life-and-death stand against the secular.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. (1 John 2:15)

In the fundamentalist view, unbelievers have only two relevant attributes: They are potential converts and sources of temptation. As objects of evangelism, they are called “crops to be harvested,” “sheep to be found,” and “fish to be netted.” Because of danger of worldly influence (much like a contagious disease), relationships with “*them*” must be handled gingerly.

Contacts must be superficial, geared toward evangelism only, and cut short if there is no positive response. Since Christians are already full of truth, there is no need for them to listen, nothing for them to learn, and much for them to lose by admitting alternative views into their consciousness.

This tunnel vision might be summarized as trusting “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” Anything that is not strictly biblical, that is, anything from outside the fundamentalist group, is suspect. By this definition, the secular humanists—educators, mental-health professionals, and liberal politicians—all offer a dangerous false gospel.

Believers are also taught to fear “false prophets.” The Bible warns against other religious leaders with appealing messages who do not preach the true gospel. The Antichrist is sometimes considered a spirit, present in unbelievers and dangerous. The Bible's ambiguity, along with the danger of eternal damnation for making a misjudgment, effectively keeps believers relying on their church leaders for correct doctrine. Fundamentalism teaches that there is only one way. All others, no matter how attractive, or how strong the testimonials, are Satan's tricks (or sometimes God's, as punishment, for instance, in 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12).

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world... They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. We are of God. (John 4:1,5)

To make things more confusing (and controlling), there is constant debate in church circles over whether various teachings or practices are “of God.” This is always an either/or argument because of the dominance of black-and-white thinking. For safety's sake, much is then relegated to being “of the world” and thus discredited. Consequently alternatives are cut off and rich human knowledge lost—most of science, social science, the arts and humanities. The true believer, then, is to trust neither inner guidance nor any information from the environment. Conveniently for the Church, this

paranoia leaves the person as vulnerable in the hands of religious leaders as a child in the home of abusive parents.

Group Pressure

A born again Christian gains entry into an elite society—the family of God. While the rest of the world is the out-group, the inner circle of believers becomes the crucial in-group. Particularly for the new believer, adhering to the expectations of the group is very important. Fundamentalists do not typically read and interpret the Bible on their own, leading private Christian lives. Rather the church group is considered vital and the minister or Bible group leader essential for “correct” interpretation of God's word.

Conformity is reinforced within the group. Members feel more secure when someone gives their testimony, when doctrines and beliefs are repeated. Self-criticism is encouraged, individual differences discouraged. Expressing doubts or ideas that are unorthodox usually means punishment of some kind, from silence to criticism to outright ostracism. This group approval or disapproval is powerful enough to manipulate behavior. Especially for those who are attracted to the social support of a religion, the threat of shame is an effective deterrent for any deviance.

Thus a major requirement in fundamentalist circles is “to fellowship.” Going it alone, as a believer is considered both dangerous and arrogant. Attending church, Bible study, and prayer meeting is expected, along with a willingness to participate in “testimonies.” While not stated explicitly, you are also expected to socialize solely with Christians. The church group usually has behavioral rules for living daily life, and nonconformity with these rules has consequences of disapproval and censure. Believers are also expected to maintain a private religious program of Bible reading, prayer, and witnessing. Difficulties in one's life are chalked up to some failure of this regular devotion. These demands serve to keep the controlling influence of the group intact. One young woman who felt abused in this way by her church was Tasha:

My church emphasized being part of God's army—not God's love—and that the church was only as strong as the weakest member. I felt shame because I knew I was the weakest and was always told what was wrong with me.

The Power of Authority

Normally, there are a variety of sources of knowledge in life. People look to the evidence of their own senses, the results of scientific study, life experience, their own intuitions and thought processes. Secular people assume that new information can be discovered through systematic investigation. In the fundamentalist Christian mindset, however, the only respected source of knowledge is authority. The ultimate authority is God, and the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, absolute and unchanging. This view of knowledge serves to further insulate and control the believer. Truth is not *found*; it is *revealed*:

Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and *receive with meekness the implanted word*, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:21)

Facts are irrelevant in this system. If a belief is in place, based on an interpretation of revealed truth, it doesn't matter what worldly discoveries take place. I recently listened to a radio talk show in which the host was discussing genetic evidence of homosexuality. A Christian caller disputed the data and insisted that homosexuality was wrong and that it was a choice, and he did so even after admitting he could not change his own heterosexual orientation simply by choice. Outsiders often find it amazing that believers treat facts as if they simply don't matter, but this style of thinking is internally consistent when you respect only authority.

In the fundamentalist system, the idea of being a “child of God” has a charm that many relate to. You remain a child, dependent on and cared for by your heavenly father. You never have to learn self-reliance or turn to yourself for strength and wisdom. And you have no source of knowledge but outside authority. Like the hymn says, you simply “trust and obey,”

much like a child should listen to a parent about bedtime or staying out of the street. Churches exploit this belief and extend their own control using the verse “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will give an account” (Hebrews 13:17).

Thought Control

So tenaciously should we cling to the world revealed by the gospel, that were I to see all the Angels of Heaven coming down to me to tell me something different, not only would I not be tempted to doubt a single syllable, but I would shut my eyes and stop my ears, for they would not deserve to be either seen or heard.

— Martin Luther (Hoffer 1951)

True believers, like Martin Luther, must keep strict control of their thoughts. The Church helps them do so with both support for conformity and with threats. A number of thought-control techniques are used: Believers are indoctrinated with beliefs on every subject, they are taught to think in black/white, good/bad terms, information is filtered, words are controlled, truth is owned, and the system claims answers to all problems.

Limited Information

Fundamentalist churches, schools, and families do not provide information about other belief systems and usually discourage members from reading widely. In very conservative groups, college education is frowned upon. Christian groups are known for banning books and objecting to certain curricula, such as the teaching of evolution. Clearly there is a fear that too much outside information will threaten faith, so it should be controlled. Children grow up thinking that what they have been taught is all there is. If you control the information people receive, you restrict their ability to think.

Thought Stopping

A big part of the Christian's battle with sin is considered mental. Imagining evil deeds is sinful. Thinking in ways that are contrary to orthodox doctrine is dangerously sinful. Therefore, believers are taught techniques to prevent too much independent thinking. The open mind is considered to be vulnerable to Satan's influence. The faithful are told to “pray without ceasing,” that is, to fill their minds with acceptable thoughts so that no others can occur. Another teaching is to say “Get thee behind me, Satan!” when you are feeling tempted. Doubts about the Christian gospel are considered temptations of Satan. Seemingly valid criticisms of Christianity are just Satan’s lies.

Sandy was a member of my religious-recovery support group. As a bright, inquisitive college student, he was learning to respect his growing ability to analyze issues. He went to his pastor with questions about Christianity. The pastor reassured Sandy and cut the discussion short. Sandy went to him again and wanted to discuss serious doubts. He was in turmoil, afraid of what might become of his childhood faith. The pastor listened briefly and finally said, “You know, Sandy, its time we call this what it is— *sin*.” Sandy never went back, unwilling to accept a religion that made thinking a sin.

Distortion of Language

In fundamentalist circles and in the Bible, many words are used in unique ways, with distinct meanings. Part of joining the culture is learning to use those words. The language changes may appear subtle and innocent in the beginning, but eventually, through repetition, believers’ thoughts become controlled by the very words that are used to describe reality and the specific meanings that are assigned by the system. This manipulation of thought is powerful and nearly invisible. (Think about how difficult it is to describe something that has no name to another person—a sensation, an emotion, or a particular shade of color. Our memories and thoughts, as well as communication, depend on our having the right words.)

Specific words are usurped and misused, with the effect of changing and shaping basic assumptions. Edmund Cohen, in his book *The Mind of the*

Bible-Believer (1988), calls it “homicide,” the killing of words. He says that in Christianity, some key words that are also important in human experience generally, are redefined and become so overburdened with ponderous, contrived, and dissonant meanings that they are “put out of commission entirely as vehicles for articulate thought or communication.” He examines the distortions of the words *life*, *death*, *truth*, *wisdom*, *righteousness*, *justice*, *liberty*, *bondage*, *love*, *hate*, *will*, *grace*, *witness*, and *word*.

For example, Cohen points out that *wisdom* is used so as to exclude any basis except divine commandment. Human wisdom is disparaged as “foolishness” and equated with wickedness:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:19–21)

The definition of *wisdom* in this system is a simple tautology: Since wisdom is the province of God, anything God does is “just,” “wise,” and “righteous,” even though it seems wrong to humans. As Cohen points out, God is defined in terms of these words and they are all redefined in terms of him. Any wisdom from other sources is declared null and void. People who have contributed in art, science, and politics are absurdly called “foolish” and “wicked” because they brought something other than the Christian gospel. Likewise *truth* in the Bible does not refer to facts or sincerity, but rather to correct scriptural doctrine. And a lie is any deviation from such doctrine: “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” (1 John 2:22). The use of the word *truth* to mean acceptable doctrine makes the doctrine more attractive to a potential convert, while *lie* serves to alienate believers from the surrounding world.

Freedom in the Bible also means something very different from our usual notion of being able to make choices. It compares more closely to being *free* of lice. In the following verse, it is clear that the believer is no closer to having free will. *Freedom* simply means “available for subjection to God” instead of to sin.

But thanks are to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:17–18)

With these new definitions, it becomes interesting to look at that old favorite, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Another potent example of this manipulation of language is the use of *love*, which translates to *obedience*:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments ... He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.” (John 14:15, 21)

Cohen points out that just as truth is torn away from the realm of fact, love is removed from the realm of human affections. Human love is disparaged as frail and fickle, while agape—unselfish, altruistic love that is *from God*—is held up as the ideal. This can appeal greatly to converts disappointed with their human relationships. Yet, it has little to do with what we usually think of as love: affection, sharing thoughts and feelings, caring, accepting, forgiving, empathizing, touching, listening, giving, respecting, helping, appreciating, supporting, and so on. It is a mental activity of adhering to code. A Christian “loves” a sinner because God “loves” the sinner and one must follow suit. Love to the evangelical is simply a willingness to put up with a sinner in order to obey the commission to preach the gospel. Thus the fundamentalist can say, without noticing the inconsistency, “I love the sinner, but not the sin.” To the uninitiated, this is a strange kind of love, that tries to divorce persons from their activities and then judges those activities

with amazing ferocity. In this type of love, there is no desire to know or be known, which in our everyday understanding, underlies the condition of love. Normally, the development of intimacy in human relations involves increasing levels of self-disclosure and mutual acceptance based on equal standing. In contrast, the Christian preaching the gospel is by no means acting vulnerable, while working hard to find a vulnerable spot in the potential proselyte.

Redefining words is also a way to control emotions. Hassan (1988) gives an example of this in the way *happiness* is used:

In order to control someone through his or her emotions, feelings often have to be redefined. Happiness, for example, is a feeling everyone desires. However, if happiness is defined as being closer to God, and God is unhappy (as He apparently is in many religious cults), then the way to be happy is to be unhappy. Happiness, therefore, consists in suffering so you can grow closer to God.

In the fundamentalist context, happiness usually means a kind of contentment or acceptance. Emotionality is muted. Because it is not acceptable to pursue personal pleasure in raw form, feelings of sheer exuberance are suspect. Certainly, a deep immersion in sensory experience is unacceptable. True happiness consists of simply being close to God, and the best emotion you can expect is serenity.

Another aspect of language control relates to the concept of mystical manipulation. Certain words are elevated to special status and take on a superstitious quality. Any references to *God* or *Jesus* are put in the category of “taking the Lord's name in vain” when used in ways that are not up to code. In conservative circles, this goes beyond using God or Jesus as an exclamation and includes slang words such as *gee* and *golly*. Words like damn are prohibited because of their religious significance, along with all the usual “bad language” condemned in polite society. The difference in the fundamentalist context is the strange degree to which words are treated as

real. Christians become paranoid about the mere utterance of a word, worrying about the consequences of blasphemy, which carries a threat of eternal damnation.

Giving words a superstitious power works to unconsciously control people through fear. A phobia about words can continue even after a believer leaves the fold, lending a residual power to the former belief system. One evening in my religious recovery group, we had a humorous time taking turns saying “shit.” It was very difficult for one woman who finally laughed with relief.

Closed System of Logic

All scripture is inspired by God. (2 Timothy 3:16)

Fundamentalist Christianity rests on circular reasoning and pat answers. The belief system is brilliantly constructed to provide its own support—if you don't look too closely at the logic. It is a *closed system*, satisfied with its own internal evidence of *truth*. It is closed in that any information or argument from outside is rejected *a priori* because, as discussed above, it is a “lie,” not of the “truth.”

All questions are answered within the belief system itself, usually with circular reasoning, for example:

Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:6)

The tautology in this passage is absurd when you think about it, but deceptive and powerful for the person fearing for salvation. In essence, it says “We're right and the world is wrong because we say so, and the proof of being of God is whether someone listens to us, while the proof of being wrong is listening to them.”

There is no question for which there is not some kind of answer, and these answers are not disprovable, using the internal terminology and

assumptions of the system and therefore appearing convincing to the person wanting very much to believe. This seeming defeat of all criticism constitutes a masterful manipulation. The new convert is often enormously impressed with the seasoned believer who can repeat all of the canned responses, most of which either “answer” simply by denying the validity of the question or by evoking the perfection of God and the sinfulness of mankind, as some examples show:

Q: I have accepted Jesus as my Savior, but I don't feel any different.

A: Being saved is not about feelings; it's about obeying the Word of God.

Q: How is it fair for millions of people who have never heard of Christ to go to hell?

A: God is just and we must trust Him to make those judgments. Just because you don't believe in hell doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Q: What if you're the one that's wrong about this? We can't really know for sure, can we?

A: I'll be okay either way, whereas you are taking a great risk. If you accept Jesus, there's nothing to lose.

Q: I see a lot of Christians that are no better than anyone else.

A: Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven. You aren't supposed to look at other people for examples. Jesus is our only role model.

Q: What about other religions that also claim to know God?

A: Humans will naturally seek relationship with God, and many false religions have grown up. It only proves that man needs God, not that they are true.

Another aspect of this closed system is the way all of your personal experiences can be explained. If good things happen, God is blessing you. If

bad things happen, God is teaching you. No matter what, you cannot fault God or the religion. In I Corinthians 10:13 you are told that nothing is too hard for you to handle. The God who tortured Job was okay because “He wounds, but he binds up; he smites, but his hands heal” (Job 5:17, 18). So if you are having a problem, it is you who are wrong and you must rearrange your perceptions. This is a masterful manipulation, sufficient to make you feel crazy if you do not mold your mind.

Exercise 4.1: Manipulations Inventory

To create a “manipulations inventory,” begin by working through the following checklist to determine which types of manipulations were most effective on you. You may have felt a strong burden of guilt over Christ’s death, for example, but experienced relatively little manipulation in the form of altered states.

Manipulations Checklist

Directions: For each item, mark the number that best reflects how powerfully that manipulation affected you. For example, mark 1 if the issue was slightly bothersome to you, 3 if it was moderately troubling, and 5 if it was strongly disturbing. Mark 2 or 4 if the issue fell somewhere between these feelings.

Manipulation	Effectiveness
Threat of eternal damnation	1 2 3 4 5
The fear of isolation and vulnerability	1 2 3 4 5
The fear of shame for "failing"	1 2 3 4 5
The feeling of guilt for Christ's death	1 2 3 4 5
The feeling of being responsible for others	1 2 3 4 5
Guilt about sin and the expectation of perfection	1 2 3 4 5
Experiences of altered states	1 2 3 4 5
The interpretation placed on my private spiritual experiences	1 2 3 4 5

Symbols, ritual, and ceremony	1	2	3	4	5
Distrust of my own perceptions and experiences	1	2	3	4	5
Discrediting the outside world	1	2	3	4	5
Group pressure	1	2	3	4	5
The authority of the church and the Bible	1	2	3	4	5
The limitation of information	1	2	3	4	5
Techniques of thought stopping	1	2	3	4	5
The distortion of language	1	2	3	4	5
The internal logic and apparent answers	1	2	3	4	5

Writing exercise: Now write about the mind control manipulations that you experienced as a believer. Describe the ones that were most powerful for you.

How do you think these manipulations relate to the particular needs that were met for you in your faith?

Now imagine going back in time to be with your younger self and privately explaining to this person how you know all about religious manipulations. Imagine your younger self as a person who is doing the best she or he can. From your present vantage point as an older and wiser being, explain the insights that you now have and comfort your younger self about what he or she is going through. Write down what you would say:

Imagine now talking with your inner child in a similar manner, with compassion and understanding. Explain what you think she or he might still be dealing with as leftovers from the manipulations. (You can mention that understanding these things will lessen the impact, and that it's not her fault that there are still leftovers).

Chapter 5

Breaking Away

Until one breaks away, it's very frightening to imagine that it's all wrong. The trap that people get into is being afraid—taught to be afraid—to doubt any piece of the wall. If any chink appears in the wall, the damn thing is going to come down, and not only are you going to go to hell, but you're going to have enormous uncertainties about everything—what's right to do, what's wrong to do, what's smart to do, what's not smart to do, because it was all spelled out.

— Dave

Many people leave fundamentalist Christianity, but they seldom tell their stories on national television or appear in front of an audience to lecture about it. Since they often feel angry or disgusted, they might not even want to talk about it. Wounds take time to heal. In addition, the indoctrination can be so deep that you are still worried that “*they might be right.*” It feels safer not to criticize.

Yet many other former believers have had the same disappointing and damaging experiences. When people do find a way to talk it over, they often discover they have had similar reasons for breaking away.

This chapter describes a number of key reasons people leave fundamentalism. It is not an exhaustive list, or a controlled study. Nor is it meant to be a thorough analysis of how belief systems change. Since the purpose of this book is to support readers who have chosen to take an other path, I hope that hearing the voices of others who have left the fold will help you find reassurance that your intuitions about the issues are valid and shared by others.

In general, people make changes of all kinds based on integrating information from new experiences. Human beings are “wired” to survive

and thrive. Thus when we are disappointed with the methods we are using to meet needs, we are likely after a while to seek new methods. Also, change is more likely to occur if we are frustrated and we have access to information about alternatives. In effect, there are forces that push and forces that pull. Formally religious people find other ways to live, without the intellectual, emotional, and ethical discomforts that had become bothersome. New satisfactions add to the impact of the dissatisfactions, and the combination becomes enough to force the break. These multiple influences can be subtle and accumulate without clear awareness.

Reasons for Leaving

A minister once told me he wished he knew who or what burned me so badly I left Christianity. I didn't answer. I wasn't burned. I *evolved*.

— John

Developmental Change

To begin with, moving on from a rigid religion makes sense in the context of normal human development. As they mature, human beings change, grow, and become more complex. This occurs most obviously in infancy and continues dramatically through childhood. This change is not random, but progresses with increased physical skill, emotional maturity, moral and cognitive development.

Human development continues in adulthood as well. People gain knowledge, integrate their experiences, and evolve through stages of maturity. Adults learn to accept the grays in life—the ambiguities, the complexities. We learn to appreciate paradoxes and become wiser in the way we deal with our existence. As we change and grow, we have a normal urge for expansion.

However, development can be arrested. This is one way of understanding the state of mind produced by a restrictive religion. If you are prevented from developing your critical thinking abilities and trusting your own

feelings, it is very hard to evolve. You stay stuck in a dogmatic, authoritarian framework, which operates on a simple dualistic basis of right and wrong, reward and punishment.

The concept of fundamentalism as a case of arrested development has been discussed by Robert Shinn (1984), who points out the problematic habits such as treating symbols as though they were identical with the realities they represent; persisting with anthropomorphic understandings of God, Satan, heaven, and hell; and putting an extreme emphasis on the “end-times.” Shinn also notes that religious people often put their trust in preachers, evangelists, or Christian authors who have a following, which is a pattern of immature conformity consistent with this stage of development. Then, because a favorite pastor or “Christian athlete” is adored, the stage is set for a serious trauma when he or she “fails” them. John, who was quoted above, pointed out that famous Christians are often used to confirm experience: “Wow! So-and-so is a Christian!”

Thus leaving the fundamentalist fold can be understood as getting on with your development. There is hope! At this point, however, you may feel as though you are much younger than your years, like a child or adolescent. While this may feel frightening and perhaps make you angry, the good news is that you will learn and grow quite naturally when the mental obstructions are removed and you learn to trust yourself. You are not wrong for moving on. Sometimes, a spurt of personal development comes with a major life transition. For Laura, it was the birth of a child:

I believed the Bible's promises and prophecies. I declined my parents' offer to pay for a college education and devoted my time to studying the Bible and volunteering full-time in the ministry.

At the age of 28, as I was expecting my first child, my whole concept of life and of the future collapsed. It was as if I had awoken from a dream state and saw reality for the first time. In the midst of the ensuing confusion I was left with the task normally reserved for adolescents: the search for whom I am and

what I am to do with my life. The nagging doubts that I had been able to hold at bay for years were finally slipping through.

The Bible and Fundamentalist Doctrine

Questions about doctrine emerge easily when the ban on thinking is lifted, even slightly. You may have been in an environment that supported this, such as college, or simply honored your own intellectual curiosity. This often happens, as people get older and are less dependent on authority figures to provide the “truth.”

Some of the most serious intellectual and ethical issues in fundamentalism are eloquently addressed in *Fundamentalism: Hazards and Heartbreaks*, by Rod Evans and Irwin Berent (1988). Central to most of these issues is fundamentalism's most basic tenet—biblical inerrancy or infallibility. Believers hold that every word in the Bible has not only been inspired but also literally dictated by God. Thus we are to believe every verse and every story as spoken directly by God, and this creates some serious problems, including:

- Intellectual difficulty with overgeneralizations, conflicts with science, and contradictions.
- Moral difficulties where God is portrayed at times as partial, vengeful, and deceptive, while in other parts of the Bible universal love is taught; the history of the Hebrews in the Bible shows progress in moral concern rather than a static code; injustice in the Bible including the slaughter of innocent people and minor transgressors.
- Moral difficulty with concept of endless torture in hell.
- Problem with occasions of Jesus expressing vindictiveness, discourtesy, narrow-mindedness, and ethnic and religious intolerance.
- Intellectual difficulties with the human decision-making process for deciding the books of the Bible and questions of the value of

other writings not included.

- Nonuniqueness of Judeo-Christian teachings and practices. Other religions have similar rituals and beliefs, including sacrifice and vicarious atonement through the death of a god, union of a god and a virgin, trinities, the mother Mary (Myrrha, Maya, Maia, and Maritala), a place for good people who die and a hell of fire, an apocalypse, the first man falling from the god's favor by doing something forbidden or having been tempted by some evil animal, catastrophic floods in which the whole race is exterminated (with details analogous to the story of the flood), a man being swallowed by a fish and then spat out alive, miracles as proof of power and divine messengers.
- Moral difficulties with intolerance and oppression in today's society, which are based on the Bible.
- Intellectual difficulties with New Testament authors' interpretation of events as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. There are a number of references to "scriptures" that simply don't exist.

People who leave fundamentalism usually take issue with the most central and most destructive doctrine of all—the doctrine of original sin. With increasing self-respect, contact with small children, knowledge of humanism, or connection with nature, it becomes emotionally and logically untenable to view the world as totally fallen and wicked. Other points of view offer more sane and livable options. Fred, a college professor, became dissatisfied with fundamentalist doctrine during adolescence and college:

I remember it began to really bother me when I asked the question "What happens to little children who die without being saved because they're too young?" I also remember asking about the people in other countries, Africa and other places, where they had never heard of Jesus or of Christianity. The answer was always the same that they were going to hell. And then the sequel to that was, "and their blood is on our hands." This was the lever

for being a missionary or contributing to the missionaries, and I didn't like that.

More and more I came to feel that those kinds of pictures of God just couldn't be God. No one else would behave that way! You wouldn't do that, your parents wouldn't do that, and so on. So those kinds of ideas came. It just didn't feel right.

Then I went away to school. I studied science, which emphasizes a particular model for truth. I became more immersed in that picture of truth, which wasn't the same as the picture that I grew up with from the church, which just believed—faith over facts. My church even believed that when push came to shove, it was only faith that counted; works didn't count.

And then of course in college I had friends who were Catholics; I had friends who were Jews; I had friends who were definitely atheistic. And I started coming across a lot of other ideas, intelligently and even firmly held by these friends—ideas that contradicted what I had been taught. Some of these were infinitely more humane.

Another ex-fundamentalist, Greg, expresses his disillusionment with the God of the Bible, and the rationalizations used to defend biblical inconsistencies, this way:

Once I started questioning, I felt very, very angry, and I just felt like “this is not God, this cannot be God.” No sane God would do the things that he was said to have done. People outside the faith had been telling me that for years. And I answered with things like “Well, maybe it's true that the Israelites killed all these people when God told them to, but that's because those people were evil” or “That's because dying is not the worst thing that can happen to you; living without faith in God is worse.” Just garbage.

And I found contradictions, like in Timothy, where it says a woman who bears children shall be saved. What does that mean? Does that mean there's a different plan of salvation for women than there is for men? In other words, in some places it would say that if you believe, you're saved and in other places it would say, at the Last Judgment, only those that did good deeds would be saved.

Fundamentalist Attitudes

With growing awareness, former believers no longer feel comfortable with a rigid, authoritarian style of thinking. It doesn't make sense to categorize everything as either right or wrong. It feels wrong to forbid original thought and faith in feelings. The endless rules seem stuck in time and unsuited to a changing world and flexible circumstances. As a person develops environmental consciousness, it seems bizarre to neglect the earth while looking forward to an apocalypse. Fundamentalist attitudes toward sex and pleasure seem archaic.

The fundamentalist mindset feels stifling to the individual and cruel in its implications for others. A believer who becomes more open-minded toward diversity of lifestyle can become unwilling to toe the party line in condemning others. In the past slavery was approved, and bigoted attitudes are still common in conservative churches. At present, the rhetoric about "family values" is strangely intolerant of varieties of family structure and women's issues. The most glaring condemnation is of gays and lesbians, which can result in violent assaults, not Christian love.

When Cheri came to me for therapy, she described her struggle as a lesbian. She grew up the daughter of fundamentalist missionaries and a sincere born again believer.

In college, she realized that she was more attracted to women, and always had been. But it was a Christian college and homosexuality was considered wrong. When she became depressed and sought counseling, she was told her preference was wrong and that she should try harder with men. She was

actually encouraged to have sex with men. This kind of unsupportive, bizarre, and judgmental treatment continued with a number of counselors.

Nevertheless, she developed a very fulfilling love relationship with a woman named Jean. However, both were Christians and racked with guilt despite the joy they had in their relationship. It became troubled and they tried to get help. The counseling was not helpful. Jean broke off the relationship because she couldn't handle the guilt.

Cheri stopped going to church but mourned the loss of her faith and her Christian community. When she came out to her family, they were devastated. Her Christian brother refused to speak to her for years and her sister told her she was no longer her sister. Jean was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward. The staff would not let Cheri visit for more than a few minutes, not considering her to be family. Later on, Cheri also had a hospital stay, committing herself because she felt suicidal.

Finally, Cheri found a church for gays and lesbians. The pastor explained away all the Bible verses condemning homosexuality. He said God loved them and they could still have a relationship with Jesus. When they sang “What a friend we have in Jesus,” Cheri cried with joy and relief.

Cheri eventually left Christianity altogether, because problems persisted and she continued to fight the deep-down conviction that she was somehow bad at core. Years later, she learned to care for her “inner child,” telling her often that she is loved and good and precious. She still misses Jean.

Sexism and Patriarchy

The male dominance of Christianity is often a particular sore point for women who leave the fold. The God of the Bible is male, Jesus was male, the disciples were all male, and many teachings are oppressive to women. Eve is blamed for bringing sin into the world, and women are seen as synonymous with sex and temptation—hence the fear and need for domination of women (Pagels, 1988).

This can easily be understood as a male effort at self-control. Men who are afraid of their human, emotional, sensuous nature can externalize these traits and “control” them by controlling women. This attitude is obvious in the paranoid way the Apostle Paul wrote about sin, sex, and women.

For many women today who have developed a feminist consciousness, the church becomes an impossible environment. For some who cherish their faith, this is very painful. They try to twist Scripture and church practices to rationalize the attitudes.

But for many it just becomes too much, and they have to leave to retain some personal integrity. For instance, Sally related the story of the last time she went to church. The pastor used her friend as an example. The friend was unmarried and had had a baby, so the pastor used her as the basis of a sermon on sexual sin and actually mentioned her name. Sally never went back to church.

For men leaving fundamentalism, it can also be a relief to reject the patriarchy and discover a more feminine spirituality. Todd explored the changes in his art:

After a few years of doing lots of paintings of crosses, I started doing circles and spheres.... I had found what was missing from my Christian cosmology—The Feminine. The sexual bias in the Christian beliefs starts with Eve and is unrelenting in repressing Women as equal to Men, let alone a Goddess equal to a God. Once I could see that bias, the power and influence of the patriarchy began to lose its grip on me. From this point on, “evil” became more defined to me. It is consciousness without compassion; it is awareness disconnected from the effects of its actions.

Disappointment with Christian Life

Christians are promised huge benefits for becoming “born again.” You expect to feel different, to have more love, joy, and peace—the “abundant

life.” You also expect to have mastery over problems in your life. And you want to grow in strength and wisdom. In the church group, you expect a superior level of Christian love.

These expectations for personal change and meaningful community are critical for many. Thus when they are not fulfilled, or not satisfied completely, doubt sets in about the system. This issue is far from straight forward, however. Because the individual self is so denigrated in fundamentalist doctrine, failure to experience the benefits of Christian living is usually blamed on the individual. “You weren't doing something right. You need to pray more,” they say. “Seek the Lord, He is teaching you something. Humble yourself.”

This causes sincere believers to keep trying for many years, frustrated but self-blaming. Since many other Christians maintain a positive facade, it can seem as though others are succeeding. Believers go through tortuous cycles of guilt and repentance, trying to get it right. Church attendance and Bible reading can become compulsive as an effort to fend off doubt. Moments of joy and happiness do occur, but you wonder why good feelings cannot be sustained. Many a Bible study is about how to live a more “victorious life.”

In Daniel's case, he was disappointed when the personal changes he expected did not occur. At the age of eighteen, he very consciously became a Christian, wanting a close relationship with God and fellow Christians. The “fruits of the Spirit” did not materialize, even though he devoted himself to the Christian lifestyle.

I noticed right away that it wasn't as profound as I wanted it to be. There's a sense that it *should* be a big experience. It should feel like your life has suddenly been changed. I started to realize that what I was supposed to be getting from being Christian—a sense of joy and release, and thankfulness and holiness I wasn't getting. Instead of making me more joyous and making it easier for me to live life, it had just placed this burden of obligation and guilt on me which I didn't feel it was natural for me to live up to.

It also made me less able to love people, rather than more. I was supposed to be full of this love from God, which would make it easier to see people for what they really were, but I didn't find that to be the case. I was so full of moral distinctions, and I was so anxious to say what I thought was true and to set myself apart and to say I'm a Christian and I think this and that and this is why. I found myself increasingly moralistic and harsh. I found it harder and harder to be friendly, and I became more and more socially isolated, which was just the opposite from what I had imagined.

After three years, Daniel left Christianity. He understood it as something he tried that *didn't work*. This was fortunately very different from the experience of Christians who have been raised in the system and deeply indoctrinated to fault themselves for any disappointment.

The effort to succeed at being a Christian can sometimes take on monumental proportions. Mark was an intelligent young man who became obsessed with ridding himself of sin, to the point of becoming incapacitated.

I “asked Jesus into my heart” according to the instructions I read in a tract. It was the happiest time in my life. I really did learn to love some of my fellow human beings, for the first time, even if this love only extended to those within the Christian circle. And, I learned to love God. My joy in worship was of an overwhelming intensity.

Fundamentalism gradually supplanted what little remained of the real world for me. Everything was Jesus, and Praise God, and Amen. I spent hours learning the Bible. I tried to witness to all my classmates. I lived to make spiritual progress. It was the most important thing in my life. But suddenly, I found that I needed to confess all sorts of sins to everybody.

Nobody ever explained that there might be things that were too small to be worth talking about. I took the Bible literally: “If you

bring your gift to the altar and your brother has aught against you, go and be reconciled with him.” I took this to mean that God would not even hear my prayers unless I had confessed everything and apologized to everyone I'd wronged.

I curtailed my activities to almost nothing. I couldn't even read the newspaper sometimes because I would see things about sex or violence and thought it was bad for me to read those things. I couldn't be angry because that was a sin. What I came out with was that God hates who I really am. What he loves is somebody who's totally submissive to him, totally dominated by him, totally him. There's no room left for any human being.

Many other sincere Christians have found that the demands of the religion have led to emotional problems. The most common struggle is with depression because a person's normal joy in living is suppressed in order to be faithful. Mental health issues within the fundamentalist fold have even led to the recent establishment of inpatient treatment centers. (See Edmund Cohen's article, “And Now—Psychiatric Wards for Born-Again Christians Only” in *Free Inquiry*, Summer 1993.) Physical symptoms are also frequent indicators of the stress believer's experience. Finally, the mental and physical pain can just become too much of a price to pay.

Disenchantment with Christian Community

People often join a church with the hope that this group of people will exhibit a love and compassion and sanity that are rare in the world. Indeed, the Bible says “They shall know us by our love.” When this is not the experience, disillusionment sets in.

The believer who starts questioning begins to notice that other Christians are also struggling. You may become more aware of all the judgments that go on in the group, the fear of outsiders, and the selective reading of the Bible to bolster favored doctrines. Sometimes the group is harsh, and the doubting person leaves to escape the pain. Donna already had doubts about her faith when her marriage broke up. The church would simply not forgive

her for her divorce. They considered it “unbiblical” and remarriage adultery. She couldn’t defend herself with Scripture and found the judgmental treatment intolerable. To take care of herself and get on with her life Donna decided it was time to leave.

Karen tried for years to measure up to the expectations of a very strict “legalistic” church group. She came from a troubled family background and desperately wanted love and approval. In retrospect she sees that she put up with a huge amount of criticism, trying to fit in to this group. They told her how to act, how to dress, how to fix her hair, and ruled the other details of how she lived her life. Finally, one day she could no longer take it and left. When I worked with her in therapy, her leftover rage frequently made her break down in tears. She had to retrieve her sense of self and work to find out who she was. In her case, she remained a Christian but was adamant about a very different conception of God.

The behavior of other individual Christians can be faith shattering after you have been taught that God transforms lives. Hearing about the private affairs of TV evangelists or the disgusting frequency of clerical child abuse is enough to make you question the religious system. David was one of many who faced a disturbing discrepancy in his own family:

My father was such an ever-living hypocrite. He’d get up and preach about love on Sunday morning and then go home and hate his neighbors all week. You know when you're a little kid you don’t mind so much, but when you get to be a teenager and you see somebody acting like this, you start to think “this isn’t right.”

New Information and Other Worldviews

When I first started college, it was an interesting experience to read, let's say, Plato. I thought “Man, he says some things that weren't like what they told me back home! But they make a lot of sense. This guy's got to be right!” And then, two months later, I was reading some other person, who was pretty much

contradicting Plato, and I thought “Gee, this guy's got to be right!”

The best thing I learned out of all that philosophy was not distaste for philosophy, but a strong feeling that one has a right to reserve one's judgment. As a scientist, you reserve judgment on enormous numbers of things, and it's important to keep very clear in your head as you're working that you don't know this and you don't know that. It feels like a better way to go through life for me than the old way, which was to not allow myself to doubt, not allow myself to question.

— Fred

It is often a huge revelation to intellectually sheltered fundamentalists that there are other viable views of reality. In the environment I grew up in, outside views were dismissed as pathetic human attempts to understand life and other religions were regarded as hopeless efforts to reach God. Christianity was presented as the only religion where God *reached down to man*.

But it becomes a great effort to keep on the intellectual blinders when you are exposed adequately to new information. Many former fundamentalists have described the experience of reading and learning and being surprised to find “worldly wisdom” of value. New options open up.

For example, the natural sciences explain much about this world and the social sciences offer numerous insights about people. An understanding of the scientific method generally makes the nature of knowledge acquisition completely different. It is not merely received from authority. Biology and archaeology challenge creationism. Psychology challenges assumptions about human nature, behavior, and change processes. Other religions and philosophies are equally defensible. Humanism in particular offers an optimistic and viable nonsupernatural approach to life.

Some of these discoveries can be quite the surprise and disconcerting at first. Many atheists are not unhappy or immoral. A great number of people live quite easily without a coherent rational philosophy of life at all. They prefer to accept a great deal of mystery and even absurdity. Yet people have values and frequently choose to treat each other with more respect than the religious zealots. Novels and films reveal a great variety of tolerance and lifestyle. Traveling with an open mind can provide cross-cultural insights that challenge a “one-way” mindset.

Learning about other interpretations of Christianity and the Bible can also be quite the revelation. Reading about the Gnostics was an eye-opener for me personally—the idea of a very different group of early Christians with more personal and feminine views on Christianity. They were wiped out by the increasingly political force of the dominant church group (Pagels 1979). In modern times, there has been a rediscovery of the Gnostics and also the ancient goddess religions. Importantly, more data about the history of Christianity and the Bible itself can be very enlightening. A good starting point for some of this critical information is the impressive collection of essays in *The Book Your Church Doesn't Want You to Read* (Leedom, 1993).

New information can come in many forms, and once you allow intellectual freedom, the formerly solid structure of dogmatic belief begins to crumble. We were taught that miracles were proof of Christianity. Yet miracles happen in many contexts. (And some miraculous claims have natural explanations; others are hoaxes.) There are many life-changing events, not just Christian conversion. An illness, an accident, a birth, a death, a love relationship, and a natural disaster—all can have profound and positive consequences. In particular, “near death experiences” often result in a letting go of fear of the hereafter and a renewed interest in life.

Even glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is an ambiguous phenomenon. Since I was an avid tongues-speaker myself, I was fascinated to find out that in the research on glossolalia, linguists are in agreement that tongues are not languages. There is no discernible grammatical structure, only a

vague overall resemblance to the sounds and cadences of a natural language. I also learned that tongues-speakers who lose their Pentecostal faith invariably retain their ability to glossolate. This was my experience too and always felt very strange. Research has also shown that the ecstatic altered states of consciousness attributed to the Holy Spirit can be perfectly compared to states achieved through electrical stimulation, chemical means, and hypnosis (Mandell, 1980).

None of this new information necessarily eliminates spiritual realities. Rather it indicates that Christianity does not have a monopoly on the spiritual or on truth. The door is open to other interpretations. For example, when I spent some time with a group of Zen Buddhists not long ago, they told me of the changes in their lives as a result of meditation. Much of it sounded identical to Christian testimonials, including reports of illnesses cured, character changes of greater patience and compassion, and life going more smoothly. During meditation, they had sensations of strong light, power entering, and other physical changes.

Michael was a young man who needed more intellectual satisfaction after knowing only his parents' fundamentalist religion. He described his process of leaving as a combination of facing problems in the faith and finding an alternative worldview while in college.

I read quite a few books, trying to determine if the Bible could actually be the Word of God or if it was just another historical document—a religious document. I ran into this clear-cut, very plausible explanation of how the Christian church evolved under the Roman Empire—what the social conditions were that led to the rise of an institution like that. And that was what I was looking for. It even had a little bit of analysis of scripture, pointing out some of the process of change, the revisions in the gospels, like the Sermon on the Mount.

That example was the one that really stuck in my mind, because here was the Sermon printed in two gospels, and the words were

different. It had never occurred to me before that one of these had to be wrong. It can't be both; they're not the same. It was so clear, so simple. And not only that but it fit into this whole argument—the direction of change, of modification of the scriptures. I could see that it changed from a purely social message, a message dealing with the misery and suffering of the Jews under the Roman Empire, to this otherworldly spiritual life-after-death kind of thing.

That was the end for me. After that I could see how religion had been developed to serve the interests of certain classes and certain conditions, and it had been maintained for centuries since then to serve other purposes. You could just see how it worked in history.

Comfort in the World

A frequent discovery is that the world can be a good and wonderful place. Former fundamentalists laughingly talk about participating in “worldly” activities and finding that *nothing happened!* It was not so terrible. In fact it is a great relief to let go of the image of Satan prowling around trying to ensnare you. It's nice to have different kinds of friends. It feels good to belong to the human race, to be at home on Earth, sharing basic human struggles, being part of society, caring for the planet. It's great to go dancing, have a cocktail without guilt, see a controversial play, and generally enjoy life without constant censorship. Often the more worldly views also turn out to be more humane. Michael especially enjoyed his newfound freedom and comfort. However, he first had to overcome deeply ingrained fears about leaving the faith.

I just completely threw over my whole life's beliefs. It was quite a struggle, because I was afraid that I was messing with God at first. Until I was sure that there was no God, I was afraid of bringing his wrath down on me. I thought, boy, I'm tampering with the forbidden knowledge, you know. It was scary. So it took me several years from when I first started to question things.

Then I found out the world was fun. It was great fun. You could have a good time and really party. That was quite a discovery after the stifling, confined, being-nice kind of existence that had been my whole life up until then. So I kind of went wild for a while. I was going through my teenage rebellion in my twenties. It was very exhilarating. I had a great time.

Other Fulfillments

Part of breaking away can be finding self-esteem, meaning, and love from sources outside of religion. Realizing this can be a profound experience, in part because it counters the assumption that religion is needed to attain fulfillment. Harold left a very constricting church and found a myriad of new elements to enrich his life. Spirituality continued to be important to him, but he found new ways to explore it and new ways to understand God:

When I left my religion, I experienced a complete rebirth of my spirit. I felt totally alienated, cut off from my family, my church, and my country. I tried to strip my soul of all the baggage that I had accumulated. I intensified my search for values, beliefs, and a lifestyle that would be uniquely my own. I opened wide the windows of my mind and spirit. I learned more about the power of nonviolence as I read *Warriors of Peace* by Lanza del Vasto. I learned to let my spirit soar as I read *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran. I learned to let nature take its course as I read the *Tao, the I Ching*. I learned altruism as I read *City of Joy*. I learned to trust my inner voice as I read *The Road Less Traveled*, by Scott Peck. I learned to exercise faith and hope as I read the Gospels.

Since I experienced the death of my old self and the birth of my new self, God has blessed me beyond my wildest expectations. I have learned to trust my own heart when I have a decision to make.

For Don, occasional attendance at a more open-minded church fulfilled needs for community and support. His spiritual food came from a variety of sources and he developed his own spiritual practices:

My experience with Christianity made me doubt my own instincts, while my studies and reflection on Eastern and American Indian philosophies have enlightened me. They have taught me about meditation and inner peace and loving and joining with nature. Presently I attend a church which seems to respect whatever the individual's concept of God is and works to bring us closer as people and to find the God inside us so we may do good in the world.

In my own experience, as well as others', close family relationships have been powerful fulfillments. Intimate love, the mutual support in a marriage, and the joy of parenting provide vast domains of connection and meaning. With maturity, people also find purpose and satisfaction in their careers, their friendships, and their community involvements. All of these can fill needs that you once thought could only be filled by religion.

The Process of Leaving

As indicated earlier, breaking away from fundamentalism may be gradual or abrupt. For most of the people I have talked to, it involved a fairly long period of consideration. The attractions were hard to leave, and the alternatives seemed ambiguous and/or threatening. For some people, leaving meant giving up Christianity altogether. For others, it meant a shift of orientation toward the Bible and attending a more liberal church. For Carol leaving was a lengthy, back-and-forth process, an emotional see saw:

I somehow found a way, or some kind of grace was granted me, that I quit reading my Bible. That was the beginning for me, or rather, the end of Christianity, as I knew it.

I stayed in Christianity before because I couldn't find a way out. It seemed to be God or Satan, nothing in between. If I chose God, I'd go crazy with legalism—and I mean crazy, not able to function very well at work. I would think things like “The world will hate you because you're mine,” as the scripture says. And so then I'd look at co-workers and customers in the restaurant I worked at and think, “If I'm with God, they'll *hate* me.”

If I found myself enjoying little things like an ice cream cone, I'd get the thought "In the last days men will be lovers of pleasure more than God" or "Love not the world." The "world" could be Disneyland, eating out, any pleasure. It was damned if you do (remain a Christian) damned if you don't (try to leave). There were times that it seemed I felt better emotionally when I "went back to God." So I always had that carrot dangling in front of me when I tried to get out of it.

I've fought many battles of the mind. Every once in a while I get a little panicky—"What if it *is* the end of the world? It sure looks like it; wasn't this how the Bible said it would be? Maybe you better get with the program...." But that passes. I'm now 46. I'm doing fairly well and have been the past few years. I'm functioning and can enjoy life.

Former believers often recall distinct events that felt like the proverbial last straws. I remember attending church after a long absence, because I missed the fellowship and comfort. The minister preached about "women's place," and I had a vivid fantasy of standing up in the middle of the sermon and screaming! That was my last visit to that church. My sister heard the sermon too, but she laughed it off, saying how curious it was that every time I came back to visit, the sermon was on a subject like that. For me it was not just a coincidence. I was fed up.

Peter was a former minister who described suddenly getting fed up with making excuses for revival meetings where nothing happened. He said that after an evangelist had visited, his church was usually as dull and boring as before. Typically they talked about how God moves in mysterious ways and tried to make it look like something happened when it didn't. Peter also tried to have a charismatic experience himself without success.

I went to the meetings and I was very frustrated because nothing happened to me. I blamed myself for it. Somehow or other, I couldn't turn loose. That was a part of what brought me to my

Rubican. Where I finally said, this is crazy. I would rather be honest and irreligious than to be religious based on fundamental dishonesties. And I remember one of the very powerful moments in my life came when I said, God, I'm through with this. I'm sick and tired of it. I will not progress any further down this road. I'll make a deal with you. If you want to use my body, if you want to use my brain and my mouth and my feet, you can have it. But never again, will I make excuses for your absence. And I took the Gospel tracts out of my pocket and I slapped them down on the table and I said, never again will I pass one of those out unless I do it out of spontaneous joy. This isn't fun. This isn't happiness. This is misery. And I'm doing everything out of a sense of obligation. And I don't like it. So I said, no more. If that means being irreligious, that's what I'll be.

Peter subsequently left fundamentalism to pastor a completely nondogmatic church.

For my college friend, Blake, an offensive church service was also a turning point:

I just couldn't stomach the right-wing political consciousness that I saw in every aspect of the fundamentalist movement. They were really into a last-days mentality. Chuck would give all these sermons about how righteous it is that we're going to have this giant war. I kept thinking "There's something wrong with this. This is a really creepy thought. We shouldn't be happy that there's going to be a war. I don't care what is wrong. It's the wrong sentiment to express. I mean, war is awful."

Chuck was always making these trips to Israel and talking to people. He came back from one of them and told the church, "There definitely will be war," and they almost started clapping. I don't remember; maybe they did applaud. Then as we're all singing at the end of the service, Chuck's up there grinning and

holding up this copy of the *LA Times* with the front page headlines saying “Fear of War in the Middle East.” He was grinning and holding this up, giving us this righteous news. And that just made me think, “This is crazy. This is crazy shit.” It was the first time I felt there was a fundamental aberration of values.

For some, the leave-taking is a relatively simple decision. Skipp Porteus, a former fundamentalist minister, publishes a newsletter called *Walk Away*, which includes “testimonies” of people who have chosen to simply walk away from the religion. He says that the break does not have to be a traumatic experience. The stories support a person's rational decision to leave. (See Appendix for information on Walking Away and other suggested reading.)

In Religion's Wake

For serious believers, leaving the faith is a serious thing. They agonize about the issues and study apologetics and anti-apologetics, trying to do it “right.” After Michael became thoroughly familiar with evolution and a materialist worldview, he got into arguments with anyone religious, including his parents:

I wanted to test my beliefs, to make sure I hadn't overlooked something. So I welcomed any challenge that anybody would give me. I would methodically try to pick apart their position, and I found I was always successful.

My parents would say things, and I would just state my views bluntly and point out things to them that were inconsistent. The craziness of religion just appalled me. But eventually, when I got into my thirties, I just got tired of arguing with people.

For John, moving many miles away from family and a Midwestern Bible college helped him make the break. He went through hard times, which he now understands as part of his development:

I hit bottom and was diagnosed as depressed after I left Christianity. This is because fundamentalism allowed me to ignore my true feelings and stunted the natural evolution of my psyche. I was finally dealing with the personal issues and personal growth I had been able to avoid because of my religion. I spent several years in therapy working on feelings, relationships, sexual issues, figuring out what I really want to do with my life. I think I can truly enjoy life now; knowing the loneliness and sadness I experienced bore the seeds of pursuing wisdom, secular romantic love, and spirituality.

Diane was another person who went through a rough time after leaving a rigid religion. In her case she indulged in a wild life of “drugs, sex, and rock and roll” because she wanted to be free of external controls. She realized she had a problem when her drinking became excessive and she noticed that she reacted in a rebellious, unthinking way to every kind of expectation. It took time to learn how to take charge of herself.

Feelings after leaving can be intense because of the emotional manipulations that have occurred. Feelings of fear, anger, grief, loneliness, and disconnection are possible consequences that are addressed in later chapters of this book. On the other hand, another very important and common feeling, along with the struggle, is a feeling of great relief. Years after he left, Michael talks about the freedom he has come to treasure:

The best years of my life have been since I gave up religion. There's a sense of freedom, control of your own destiny, of nothing being forbidden. You set the rules. You decide what's good for you and what's bad for you, and you learn, through damage to yourself and other people, what things are harmful.

There's a satisfaction in making your own road. You're proud of your own accomplishments, whatever they may be. You're still confined by social structures and economics and the normal constraints, but you're not tied up with this idiocy that blinds you.

You don't feel so confined by ideas. You're free to think what you want to think.

Not everyone who leaves fundamentalism gives up God or spirituality. But a common thread is the courage by which former “true believers” take on the responsibility and joy of living their own lives. It would be nice to say that everyone lives happily ever after, but life is not that simple. In many cases, there are wounds that remain and personal problems that continue as a result. For everyone, the core human dilemmas still exist, and the learning goes on. We realize that, unlike the fantasy of reaching heaven, the important thing is the journey, not the arrival. We also know that, unlike “pilgrim's progress,” the journey can be one of constant possibility and not beset with fear.

Strengths in the Legacy

I'm glad I've been a part of the religious life, as difficult as it's been. It's rather colorful and dramatic and bizarre. It's made me what I would call a healthy skeptic. It's made me who I am.

— Carol

In rebuilding your life now, a useful step will be to recognize those aspects of your religious past that have been valuable experiences. No matter what you may consider to be the damage, there are probably things you have learned that you can appreciate and build upon. What follows are strengths other people have identified. You may find them true for yourself as well.

Broad Consciousness

You learned to think broadly—about time, the world, the universe, the meaning of life. Even now, you are probably able to consider things beyond yourself and the finite space and lifetime that you occupy. You probably appreciate the importance of considering the “larger view.” This can give you the ability to look at things from alternate perspectives, which in turn gives you the freedom and courage to hold views that differ from popular opinion.

Sense of the Profound

You also learned to consider things deeply. As a religious person, you had to wrestle with ultimate questions of life and death, good and evil, truth, love, humility, dignity, responsibility, freedom, destiny, finite and infinite. While your life may now have become simpler, it will never be trite. You are likely to retain certain richness in your thinking, a capacity for appreciating the profundities of human existence. As a result, you may always desire some depth of meaning in your life. Ambition and materialism will not be primary motivators. You are not likely to fall prey to keeping up with the Joneses.

Paula was formerly a fundamentalist and a child of missionaries. Her experience of leaving the fold was a difficult process, but she also noted some strength which were a result:

I have a sense of depth in my life, and I am glad not to be bound by a great need for material things. But it also makes me feel different from others. I have few friends who know what I'm talking about when I talk of my desire for deep meaning in life and my reactions to life. I almost envy the ability of others to only be concerned with themselves and their small worlds. But those feelings do not last long, and in the end I would not trade places with them.

Vision of the Possible

You may be struggling now to accept human life as it is, but you are also likely to retain idealized notions of love, peace, beauty, compassion, fulfillment, and other such constructs. You can probably imagine a life that is expansive and creative, full of power, joy, serenity, and generosity. These are Christian ideals, from the positive side of Christianity. This kind of life may have been described and promised in ways that are dysfunctional to you now—as a package promised for giving yourself up or something you would get in the afterlife if you were good. Nevertheless, these notions of human potential can be inspiring—not discouraging impossibilities, but

guiding dreams that provide direction for personal growth. Peter described it this way:

I am striving to achieve this dream of a full life. I don't know anyone who has it, but I must say that I would rather spend my life working for something that might not ever materialize in its entirety than just give up and have nothing.

Understanding of Gentleness

Many of the personal qualities exemplified by the character of Jesus in the New Testament are essential for healthy human relationships, yet are sorely neglected in mainstream Western culture, especially in the way that males are socialized. In our society, men are expected to be ruggedly independent, aggressive, in control, and rational. They are raised to pursue power and success.

Jesus, on the other hand, is a vivid and significant alternative role model for men and women in Christian circles. The content of his preaching and the way he lived communicated values of humility, gentleness, and forgiveness. He accepted people for what they were and reached out a helping hand. He did not manipulate or exploit, but rather empowered the powerless. He saved his judgment for the self-righteous. He expressed his feelings: love, anger, fear, sadness, and commitment.

In many church circles, men will typically have more freedom to have feelings than they do in other areas. I remember noticing the way Christian men could be more sensitive and humble than non-Christians seemed able. With God in charge, there wasn't the same need to be strong, macho, and in control. Both men and women could be more honest about their weaknesses and shortcomings. This humanness is part of your legacy as well.

Awareness of Mercy

While the image of the Last Judgment may have been large and looming, there were also the strong traditions of grace and forgiveness. The vengeful “Eye for an eye” was superseded in the New Testament. Jesus asked a man

how he could refuse to forgive his own brother but expect his heavenly father to forgive him. Recall the speck versus the log in the eye or the story of casting the first stone. With these teachings in your background, you probably retain an openness and caring for people.

Human frailty, imperfection, and even serious misdeeds may evoke concern on your part instead of immediate judgment. This can make you a more whole, feeling person, with the potential for connecting with people on an emotional level, instead of relating simply to their overt behaviors. In other words, the other side of seeing human weakness is the tenderness you can have for others. You can assume they are struggling and “falling short of glory.” Your mercy is a needed quality in a world of harsh expectations and judgments.

I have little trouble dealing with traffic, irritating people, waiting in lines, et cetera. I have a lot of patience and kindness. This has helped me to be a good nurse and counselor and it has helped me in my personal life in being a better wife, mother, and friend.

— Jane

Capacity for Humility and Trust

Because of your background, you have probably escaped the “center-of-the-universe” syndrome in our society. This sense of exaggerated self-importance and responsibility is the result of the value our society places on achievement, self-determination, and power. As a result, most people experience some amount of ongoing anxiety.

It's true that we have many important decisions to make and many options. We have both the freedom and the burden of having to choose career, family, location, possessions, personal tastes, and pastimes. But there are many things that cannot be completely controlled—the opinions of others, our own emotions at times, employment conditions and economics, relationships, the weather, and many other circumstances.

There is a lot to be said for the art of surrender, the ability to *let things be*. In the fundamentalist framework, this took the form of letting God take care of things the same way a child trusts a parent. There was a healthy acceptance of the fact that you do not know everything, you cannot control everything, and most importantly, you don't need to. (The unfortunate aspect, of course, was that this also meant you weren't supposed to think clearly and seriously about big issues.)

Ironically it often turns out that you can get what you want well by not trying so hard. That is, you can achieve more control by actually controlling less. This is especially true in terms of relationships and emotional needs—getting love, sex, approval, cooperation, and respect. You get more when you do not insist.

Because of your background, you probably have experience with relaxing your fears and assuming that good things will happen. “Consider the lilies...” Jesus said. Simply “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” There is great strength in this kind of simplicity. You can be glad that you understand important aspects of being childlike, with openness and trust.

Understanding of Gratitude

“In all things give thanks,” is a biblical phrase you have heard. This attitude of gratitude can be a powerful principle for living a full life, another positive legacy of your religion. You were told to be grateful for all of God's gifts and to “count your blessings.” Saying grace at meals was a simple act of humility. Because you were expected to praise and thank God regularly, you may now have a greater capacity for noticing and appreciating the good things that you have. In your life now, you may not be attributing everything good to God in the same way. Yet you can still have an awareness of receiving wonderful things from life. It is an art to graciously accept gifts—the beauty of a sunset, the presence of a loved one, the music of a symphony. Remembering to be thankful heightens the joy of living.

Awareness of Nonmaterial Reality

If your background included a personal religious experience of your own, you retain an undeniable awareness of spiritual matters. At this point you may not know what to make of your experience anymore. That is, you may not know what words to use or how to conceptualize it. But at some level of consciousness, you may be very aware that there is more than just this physical world. This thought can be both comforting and exciting. It leaves the door open for you to develop a new spirituality—one that is more nurturing, empowering, and personally meaningful.

Moral Development

For many, biblical and church mores provided contexts for learning values and ethics: In Sunday school, you may have had lessons about sharing and kindness, been taught not to steal, and so forth. Basically, the Ten Commandments are good ideas. As a child and teenager, you likely had controls and limits on your behavior that, for the most part, functioned well. The “do's and don'ts” provided codes for your self-control and may have kept you from some dangerous experimentation.

More generally, you probably still retain certain life principles that you learned originally in a religious context. For example, you may still hold to “Do unto others...” “Love one another,” or “Let he who is without sin...” As you progress through your recovery from indoctrination and evolve your own approach to life, some of these principles may well turn out to be strengths in your character.

Skills

Religious groups can be helpful for some kinds of personal development. There are usually opportunities for musical involvement and public speaking. Youth groups, Bible study groups, and Sunday school classes provide opportunities for leadership and teaching. For those who went out witnessing, learning assertiveness was essential. Speaking about your beliefs in a secular context, such as a public classroom, may have cultivated

your courage to voice a minority view. While your outlook may be quite different now, you might still retain the courage of your convictions. Any skills you developed as a result of your involvement in the church are still yours!

Community Experience

Belonging to a group with common goals and values can be a valuable experience. If you analyzed all you learned about human relations as a church member, you might be surprised. You probably had opportunities to learn about group dynamics, leadership issues, organizing activities, and so forth. You may have learned things about power struggles within an organization as well as the strengths that a group has to offer. A group can be a cohesive environment of social support, or a place to socialize and have fun. It can be a place to explore relationships. Potentially, these are all elements of your legacy.

It was positive in the sense that I learned to love other people for the first time in my life, albeit not normal, human love. It was described as a sort of divine love, which meant that it was an unrealistic kind of love that didn't take into account people's real feelings about each other. You always had to be loving: you always had to have this sort of benevolence towards other people, even if you didn't feel that way. But it did allow me to open up to other people.

— Cathy

Healthy Skepticism

The world is full of authoritarianism and dogmatic systems. These may be religious, political, philosophical, or whatever. Having been “burned” by your former indoctrination, you are now likely to be on guard against rigid belief systems generally. You are now more aware of the dangers when you hear some pronouncement of “truth” that implies omniscience, restricts perception, and eliminates alternatives. You probably realize now that

beliefs are curious things—very powerful and often serving unacknowledged functions such as imposing power over others or ensuring personal security. The cost of dogmatic thinking is to severely limit your own range of thought and experience.

With healthy skepticism, you can now be more open, flexible, and fair. These qualities are greatly needed in a world full of bigotry and arrogance.

The strengths that you retain from your experiences with religion are very significant. In spite of the confusion, sadness, and discouragement you may be feeling, you have a breadth and depth of being that others do not have. You are likely to have important values, positive personality traits, and a spiritual capacity.

You can now challenge yourself to use these strengths to help overcome your difficulties.

Exercise 5.1: Personal Reasons Inventory

Take some time now to review your own reasons for deciding to leave your former religion. You will want to quickly jot down all the things you think contributed to your decision to leave. These could be difficulties with a literal interpretation of the Bible, disappointment with your fellow believers, or simply a sensation of emptiness, that the religion wasn't fulfilling your needs.

Even if your reasons seem not to make logical sense, write them down anyway. When you've written down as many as you can think of right now, go back and read them over. Jot down any others that occur to you. Then go back, and for each cause, write a little more about it. Consider the following questions:

Was this an issue that you recognized at the time, or is it something that you now understand was a problem?

For how long was it a concern to you? Months? Years? Always?

How important was it in your making the break? (you might want to number the causes in order of importance.)

It's likely that other causes will occur to you as you read further in this book. You may want to keep an ongoing record or journal of these causes and other aspects of your religious background to help you in the process of healing and growing.

Use this space to write about your reasons for leaving:

Exercise 5.2: Strength Inventory

Potential strengths: Sense of the profound, Vision of the possible, Understanding of gentleness, Awareness of mercy, Capacity for humility and trust, Understanding of gratitude, Awareness of nonmaterial reality, Moral development, Skills, Community experience, Healthy skepticism

Review the strengths listed above and identify the ones that describe you. Write about each one of these, asking yourself:

How does this strength describe me more specifically?

How has it helped me in my present life?

In what way can I appreciate and build upon this strength?

Strength:

Strength:

Strength:

Strength:

Afterword

Max is a wise man in his fifties. He muses on his evolution and the strong feelings he still carries from his fundamentalist past:

As a child, how to reconcile an all-good and all-powerful God with an intense feeling of abject fear of eternal damnation? The most vivid memories of church for me are the fires of hell and the immense, unending, unendurable pain, of unimaginable fear. So to praise Him and thank Him for every “blessing” leaves the child with anger at not being able to express how scared he is remembering countless nights sobbing in bed at night over the fear of hell and the guilt of anger toward this God I didn't ask for.

Then the child learns that his is but one of lots of religions. In fact, most people aren't what he is. So can this God condemn all those others, as he had been led to believe? It wasn't their fault where and when they were born.

Then adolescence sets in. And the child explores his sexuality; only to be told that such behavior—even thoughts! —Are sins in the eyes of this all-good God? The explorations continue, of course, but so does the guilt and anger. There's no way out: the “sins” continue unabated; the guilt mounts; the prayers fail.

Now doubt enters. Lots of little things are beginning not to “fit”—the whale's mouth wasn't really big enough; people didn't begin in a garden; this Christianity stuff has only been around a

couple thousand years; nobody knows how multitudes got fed, how a body arose, how blind men see, and on and on. Questions about such things are themselves sinful. The devil is at work. God continues his mysterious ways.

Could this all be a crock? Or could some of it be? None of it is, he is told. All is absolutely true. To question even the flimsiest fable is to lose all faith and all hope.

The whole package simply becomes too much to swallow. And the anger and guilt have built to a point that the only choice is to pitch the whole thing. The exit is traumatic and volatile. For many years the aversion to anything remotely “religious” is rabid. Once the break comes, no bridges are left and that's just fine, says the young adult. Let those dumb bastards wallow in that crap! Many years of this. The anger continues but the guilt and fear dissolve.

Years of reflecting on the experience mellow the feelings a bit. The god is seen as a creation of those needing one. The god is seen as so much wiser than the image depicted. A silent conspiracy is formed between the adult and the god-image. They are bemused at the foolishness of those who organize and pronounce in his name. There is almost a gentle, loving relationship, but the man still can't believe how this god lets people be so foolish, and wrong. And how can people continue to believe the drivel that surrounds them. Worse, how do they become convinced they must convey it to others?

Then a longing for a spirit self comes a haunting. Searches and questions yield little. The void is still there. But things past can't fill it.

Chapter 6

Family Background

I could never feel really loved and cared for by Jesus. Intellectually I believed that he loved me, but I needed someone to hug me and tell me that I was important. If my own parents couldn't or wouldn't do that, why would Jesus? I wanted physical nurturing, not just some fantasy of love. But, because my parents were neglecting their children supposedly for God's work and to save people from going to hell, how could I complain or ask for more of their time without feeling terribly guilty?

— Nick, the son of a minister

As each of us proceeds with personal development, we return again and again to family issues. Little else in life has the same profound impact.

In a sense, you carry your original family inside you. Father, mother, and other primary caregivers become internalized and form a permanent part of whom you are. Thus to ignore family is to ignore yourself. Understanding your family experience is to understand yourself and move on with your growth.

If your upbringing was religious, you have experienced the impact a religious family environment can have on the development of a child. In this chapter, special attention will be given to the hazards of growing up in a religious setting, particularly within fundamentalism. If you became religious as an adult, this chapter may be less relevant to you than other chapters. However, in reading this you may still be able to recognize some of the ways in which your experiences in your own family have intersected with your religious experiences.

Not all of the effects of religion in a family are negative. A shared faith can provide a family with strengths, including values, rituals, and social community. Some of the positive outcomes of your religious involvement,

covered in the previous chapter, might be family strengths as well. With this in mind, this chapter examines problematic areas to help you understand and heal from the more destructive family influences. Even if it is just within you, making peace with family is also important. Whether or not you feel like a “black sheep,” keeping your distance from anything religious, you probably have some need to come to terms with your family. Right now, the focus is on understanding your past experience.

The Family's Influence

In various ways, families mediate the meaning of religion. The teachings of the church are affected by the needs, skills, and personalities of primary caregivers. Many parents try to employ religion to compensate for what may be lacking in their own emotional makeup and repertoire of parenting skills. Consequently, children can fail to learn certain essential skills for healthy functioning. If they also suffer ill effects from the imposed religion, they may then visit this very pattern of dysfunction on the next generation. The result is a cycle with multiple contributing factors.

In a recent Christian book entitled *The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home*, psychologist Donald Sloat (1986) discusses individual differences at length and points out that some people are more prone to struggle with their Christian lives than others who are less sensitive by nature. This book is a good source for information on personality factors in a religious family. He also describes the way families and churches can unknowingly hinder emotional and spiritual growth by practices such as the following:

- Instilling a fear of God rather than a love for him
- Using guilt to manipulate
- Failure to “practice what they preach”
- Neglect of feelings and individual personalities
- Refusal to listen to questions and doubts

- Forcing a list of do's and don'ts that cloud a true understanding of God and sinfulness

All of these may be familiar to you from earlier chapters as well as your own experience. It is interesting that a Christian psychologist like Sloat has identified these family dysfunctions. However, his writing does not extend far enough to analyze the additional problems that come from a rigid fundamentalist mindset in the first place. Carol described her family this way:

My family's dysfunction began with the fact that my parents were not able to deal with emotions, so they chose religion as a crutch to help them through life. If healthy individuals chose to be in a fundamentalist faith, would the effect on the family and children be as damaging, or would it be more benign? (I wonder if an emotionally healthy person would so choose?) The fact that my parents so desperately needed their religion is reflected in their choice of career as missionaries—so they could live with this crutch every minute and be praised for their dedication.

I guess they assumed that we children would benefit in the same way from a “personal relationship with Jesus,” so they pushed and brainwashed me into believing that I wanted it too. But for me, this relationship only had a negative side—I felt guilty constantly, because I was never good enough.

Variations of Experience

Religious training can vary even within the same denomination or the same church. One leader may emphasize God as a fearsome judge who will someday send everyone to heaven or hell. Another may paint God more often as a heavenly father, who is merciful and generous to those who want to be saved. This kind of variability can have a profound effect on families and the development of children.

In turn, families influence the way a child understands the religious teaching of the church. Invariably, children spend more time with family members than they ever do in church. Some families consider religion a vague source of moral guidance, while others make it a central focus in everyday life and go to church frequently. Parents interpret the Bible in different ways to children. Parents also teach by example, thereby mediating the way a child understands the religion they profess. As you evaluate your religious experience, you can recognize how all this is woven together with your family experience. The following examples demonstrate contrasting situations.

By the time Robin was six years old, he was convinced of his badness. He had been sent to church and Bible school, where he was told often that he was a bad child and that God would punish him. Along with his father's punishment came the threat of hell each time he misbehaved. Importantly, his father always claimed religious authority in his methods of discipline. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," was taken to an extreme and Robin was beaten frequently. Domination, control, and fear reigned. Robin's mother was too afraid of his father to intervene and so she stayed quietly in the background.

As Robin's rebellion and hatred grew, he acted out more and more, and was punished accordingly. Misbehavior became a desperate way for Robin to get the parental attention he needed. Tragically, his father believed he was doing his Christian duty when he beat Robin.

As an adult, Robin continued to consider himself bad. He was an angry and volatile man when I worked with him, verbally abusive to his wife, struggling to hold a job, and basically hating the world. His style of coping with life was to intimidate everyone. The one enduring lesson he had learned from his father was how to use power tactics to get his way.

When we explored his childhood experience in therapy, Robin broke down crying. His bitterness was intense. Yet at the same time, he continued to insist that he had *deserved* the abusive treatment he got. He hated his father

but also defended him, saying that his own behavior was out of control. In his adult life, Robin continued to hold negative assumptions about himself based on religious ideas that were reinforced by a harsh father. Not surprisingly, as an adult Robin wanted nothing to do with church or any “heavenly father.”

Sarah's experience with her father was quite different. She remembers getting a very strong message from him that she was indeed “God's gift.” Her father was a minister who presented the Christian message in a way that emphasized the positive. At church, she remembers saying, “I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee, and justly deserve Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them...” Sarah laughs as she rattles off the words, surprised that she can still remember them.

And then my Dad had a response where he would bless us and take away our sins. Actually, God would take away our sins, but my Dad would do the ritual. And we did that on our knees. You know, that's the strength part. I don't feel beat up. I didn't come out thinking I was a poor miserable sinner.

The message was real positive from my Dad. That's probably where I got most of my self-esteem, because I was involved with him in church, in choir, in the youth group, all the way through twelfth grade and two years of college too. He was real powerful. And he really believed that we were all gifts of God. And that it was important to use the gifts God gave us. So he was a real positive preacher. He wasn't a hell-fire and damnation preacher.

And he also believed in having fun. It just all went together. When we were on vacations, we looked at the world around us in terms of what God had given us and how beautiful it was.

Sarah left the church in her twenties when she was unable to accept the dogma any longer and became involved in women's issues. Her parents are

still firm in their belief that their church is the only correct church, and there is some lingering tension over Sarah's leaving. But over all, Sarah is grateful that her core feeling about herself is still a positive one and that she still sees herself as God's gift.

The children of ministers and missionaries are often especially vulnerable to feelings of being secondary to God's work. It is quite common for missionary children to compete for attention, although they usually feel too guilty to complain. When missionaries live abroad, the home becomes that much more important and this intensifies the effect of problems in the family. A report from the 1990 International Conference on Missionary Kids at Nairobi, Kenya, stated, "AMK's [Adult Missionary Kids] and children of alcoholic parents have almost identical problems." Other conclusions include the following:

- Fear of intimacy ruins many MK marriages.
- AMKs tend to be so protective of hurts experienced in childhood that they render their spouses powerless.
- Eighty-five percent of MKs go into service-related careers, perhaps to compensate for feeling deprived as children.
- Among other traits, AMKs are emotionally repressed, often with feelings of guilt for their anger and resentment. A Christian white wash produces messages like "Everything is fine" or "It's God's work. How can you be critical of God's calling?"

One AMK, Ruth Van Reken, has eloquently expressed the pain of her boarding school childhood in her book *Letters I Never Wrote*, (1985), recalling the feelings she would have expressed to her parents if it had been possible. Sadly, while she describes screaming pain over the family and fierce anger at God, she conforms and says, "Even the love of family cannot stand in the way of His call on our lives. Part of me accepts it as a cold, hard fact, but another part of me weeps that it must be so." What an

incredible irony for an ideology that *professes* to be “pro-family” to be so destructive.

In my own contact with adult missionary kids, many of whom I have known since childhood, I have frequently noticed a very low level of self-awareness. Perhaps because the notion of self-denigration has been so internalized, they are not likely to critically examine their childhood experiences or fully process their feelings. If anything serious ever came up, the guilt and contradiction might be too great.

Dysfunctions in Religious Families

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:34–38)

Certain areas of family functioning in particular are negatively affected by a rigid religious belief system. Some of these parallel problems of other dysfunctional families; some issues are special to the religious family. And again, individual families vary in their particular experience. The following section describes dysfunctions common in fundamentalist families.

The Burden of Shame

The most serious problem in a fundamentalist family is the prevalence of shame. Shame in dysfunctional families is described by Charles Whitfield, author of *Healing the Child Within* (1987), as “the uncomfortable or painful feeling that we experience when we realize that a part of us is defective, bad, incomplete, rotten, phoney, inadequate, or a failure. In contrast to guilt, where we feel bad from *doing* something wrong, we feel shame from *being*

something wrong or bad. Thus guilt seems to be correctable or forgivable, whereas there seems to be no way out of shame...”

In fundamentalist families, there is a core belief that people are basically bad. Therefore, human errors are interpreted as sins instead of as innocent mistakes. Children are seen as small adults, with the same sinful tendencies and the same need to be saved. There is little recognition of child development, that children *are* different from adults and that they progress through various stages of cognitive, emotional, and moral development. From a fundamentalist point of view, issues such as egocentrism, aggression, sexuality, and teenage rebellion are treated as problems instead of natural processes.

Thus if a child acts “selfishly” it would most likely be attributed to an innate fault of nature that needs to be corrected. A family without this assumption could give a child the benefit of the doubt, assuming that behavior is linked to needs and not a flawed nature. There could be trust and faith in the child's natural development, with an expectation that healthy changes would occur over time. Instead of a focus on control and force, there could be an emphasis on fostering confidence and new skills.

Children in religious families are often disciplined through shame. Such messages include “Shame on you,” “You’re so selfish. What's the matter with you?” “You know Jesus sees you when you do that,” “How would you feel if Jesus came back when you were doing that?” This kind of belief system and these kinds of statements can obviously take a heavy toll on a child's self-esteem.

Priorities of Power and Control

Raising children can be a fearful job in an atmosphere where there is no faith that all is well in the way children naturally develop. Parents feel responsible to “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). “Spare the rod, and spoil the child” is taken quite literally. With a belief in the Bible as divinely inspired, fundamentalists take it as a guide for parenting techniques as well, despite

everything we know today about children, family systems, and emotional health.

The primary goal of relationships in a rigidly religious family centers on control, because it is believed that people cannot be trusted. There is no encompassing goal to provide support for all the members to grow and flourish in a nurturing environment.

The distribution of power is a major issue in these families. Obedience is stressed as a primary value, similar to the obedience to God that is stressed in the Bible. Parents thus feel justified in their use of power tactics with children. Mimicking the harsh God of retribution in the Old Testament, parents may punish children with a self-righteous attitude of doing their duty. To bolster their own authority, they use Scriptures such as Ephesians 6:1 where Paul says that children should obey their parents.

Using biblical support, fundamentalist families are usually patriarchal. Women are subject to their husbands, based on Paul's opinions in Ephesians 5:22–24. When I myself questioned this arrangement, I was told that there had to be a hierarchy, otherwise how would decisions be made? The implication was that without such a control system there would be conflict and chaos. Skills for sharing power or managing conflict were not even considered.

It is true that children need behavioral guidance in addition to love and support. But it needs to be thoughtful, individualized, and developmentally appropriate. This is a parenting task that requires attention and effort. Rigidly religious families often avoid the complexity of this responsibility. Instead, doctrinal rules are applied and fear of punishment used for control. By adopting such a simple formula, a family can be robbed of the enormously constructive process of consciously developing family values and mores. Absolutism makes it nearly impossible to consider individual needs and special situations in a respectful manner. As a result, children often fail to learn about personal responsibility or how to make complex choices. Such families can vary markedly in their methods of discipline, at

times with very destructive consequences. Importantly, the withholding of love and approval can be as punishing as corporal punishment, and often much more confusing. As Michelle relates:

I feel that my parents withheld praise and unconditional love as a means of controlling us. We tried hard to be perfect so they would love us, but I felt it was sinful to feel good about anything that I had done.

Stifling of Independent Thought

The fundamentalist belief system is one that purports to have all the answers. It also claims to be the only way—all deviations lead to hell. It follows then that parents who believe this would be very concerned about what their children believe. Any alternative ways of thinking about major life questions would be highly threatening. Consequently, the fundamentalist household rarely encourages children to explore their own thoughts, to be open-minded about ideas, or to come to their own conclusions. In fact, fundamentalist parents are typically vocal in their opposition to the teaching of critical thinking skills or values clarification in schools.

In the most reasonable cases, parents have a real and loving concern for the ultimate safety of their children. In the worst cases, parents use this system to avoid any dialogue with children. Insecure people have a difficult time listening to disagreements from their children, much less encouraging their right to form opinions. In authoritarian families, children grow up resentful, and they learn to conform in order to get approval. They often have difficulty forming and expressing personal opinions later in life.

Devaluation of Feelings

As you may recall, understanding, respecting, and expressing feelings is a common and serious problem area for a religious family. It was all-important to be “right with God” and “good” according to the Bible rather than being what you intuitively felt was right or good. That is, your feelings

were not respected as a gauge for values or decision-making. Emotionality was suspect, and there were always “higher” concerns than human feelings.

The biblical attitude toward human feelings is one of great suspicion. Feelings like anger, jealousy, and fear are condemned as of the flesh and the devil. Consequently, many Christians struggle with guilt when experiencing ordinary emotions. There is little help from the church in understanding the function of such feelings, including sadness. In the family, feelings are more likely to be punished than heard. Conflict is considered sinful instead of an opportunity for learning. Yet feelings are inevitable, and without understanding or skill they can be very painful to handle. Individuals can learn self-hatred for having feelings, as well as helplessness for not knowing what to do.

Surprisingly, even positive emotions are suspect if they are not within a spiritual context. In the Bible, Paul in particular goes on repeatedly about the evils of human passion and criticizes non-Christian celebrations, calling them debauchery and carousing. The impression one gets is that the only acceptable emotional states are muted and controlled positive ones.

Again, the assumption throughout much of Christian teaching is that natural human tendencies cannot be trusted. The emotions permitted are not *human* feelings, but instead are “fruits of the Spirit,” as if from an external source. Since humans are considered weak and incapable, this includes their positive feelings as well. Thus the affection we have for each other is considered infinitely inferior to God's love. Human happiness cannot compare to the “joy of the Lord”; peace of mind cannot compare to the “peace that passes all understanding.”

In the fundamentalist family, avoidance of feelings can become an actual fear of feelings. Again the costs for the child are heavy. It means a loss of self-respect and trust. In learning to deny their own feelings, children lose touch with themselves.

Somewhat ironically, Christian families can be quite unaffectionate. Because of their cautious approach to life, tiptoeing around the pitfalls of

sin and guarding against the ever-present threats of Satan creates a family environment that is often less than warm, spontaneous, and caring. Each member struggles with self-esteem while constantly judging the behavior of others. There isn't enough trust to let go and freely give the hugs, compliments, and unconditional love that children crave and need. Ordinary human love is nothing compared to agape anyway, so human bonds are not stressed. As one exfundamentalist describes it:

In our family there was very little openness and communication with respect to matters of importance, i.e., feelings and beliefs. There was a kind of family loyalty but not affection. My father held daily Bible readings during which he expounded on his own views. There was never any input from or discussion with us children. As I recall, there was occasionally unsolicited input or argument from my mother. I usually fell asleep during these sessions, but did my best to conceal that.

Another common pattern is for the family to avoid handling conflicts until the point is reached when emotions boil over. Then chaos reigns as explosions of anger, producing much pain and, even abuse. This is followed by intense feelings of guilt, and sometimes apologies, but the damage is already done.

With continued avoidance, this pattern is repeated many times, producing a family of deeply scarred individuals. Despite their belief in the grace of God, these family members may feel confused and guilty for their behavior, as well as frustrated that God does not produce changes that heal. The deep sense of personal inadequacy can be very real, yet inevitably denied, because that would mean doubting God. Feelings are repressed again and the cycle continues. Sloat also describes the damage to children and their emotions in these families. As a Christian writer his insight is unusual:

Too often, well-intentioned Christian parents treat their children as though the kids' opinions and feelings have little, if any, worth ... Evangelical parents who do not listen are creating danger

points for their children because they are communicating through their actions that they do not care about their children at a personal level. This contributes to a negative self-concept in the child.

The Ever-Present Higher Purpose

In the most sincere of Christian families, faith provides a lot of the purpose in life. Even this can create problems. With parents ever conscious of issues they consider to be of cosmic importance, the family can never be the top priority. The well being of children can never compare to parental loyalty to spiritual matters. In fact, the more dedicated the parents are to evangelical causes, the greater the risk that the children will feel unimportant. Ordinary human relationships in the family rate a distant second to the importance of following God.

In the fundamentalist belief system, families are not sacred. In contrast to Mormon theology, for example, family relationships are considered only temporary arrangements. The *real* family is spiritual. In one Bible story, Jesus was informed that his mother and brothers were waiting to speak to him. He replied,

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” and stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven are my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Matthew 12:48–50)

What happens when children become secondary to a greater good is similar to the neglect that happens to children in families where one parent is addicted to drugs, alcohol, work, or money. Religious devotion, however, tends to involve both parents and can thus be especially problematic. Even more troublesome is the insistence that devotion is a higher calling. Children cannot question this without feeling guilty, selfish, or absurd. With other kinds of neglect, society is more likely to respond with censure or

punishment, require treatment or suggest alternatives, but this kind of intervention is very unlikely within a religious family system.

Avoidance of Responsibility

In the fundamentalist system, there is a central emphasis on individualism—each person is ultimately considered responsible for getting his or her needs met by God. Parents are expected to make clear that emotional needs are met through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of that, many parents seem to feel absolved of responsibility for these needs.

Of course, if an individual in the family does not choose to have this relationship with Jesus, that is his or her own fault. Emotional needs are dismissed and the individual blamed for refusing God's love.

In families that are uncomfortable sharing feelings, even about Jesus, the contradiction between personal and interpersonal experiences can be dramatic. The relationships with Jesus are all treated as *separate* intimacies with God, kept secret, in a way, as if everyone was having an affair. Hence in very religious families there can be a strange kind of alienation between the individuals. And it can be confusing.

Rigidly religious families also can avoid the responsibility of teaching interpersonal skills (such as communicating needs clearly, listening, or resolving conflicts). Rather than being seen as attempts to cope, “negative” behaviors are viewed as evidence of a child's inherently flawed nature. Since people are not given credit for good intentions and capability, there is little if any effort to actually teach skills for healthy human relationships. The only principle taught is to ask God for help—for patience, love, understanding—and to be humble, open, and receptive if and when he bestows them. (And if he doesn't, you didn't ask properly.)

This simplistic formula typically results only in repeated failures. Individuals go through cycles of guilt, renewed intention, failure, and more guilt. Bad habits continue and are replicated across generations. Self-respect falls lower and lower. Over time, this may produce an entire family of

individuals with low self-esteem. The buried self-hatred and mutual disrespect undercuts their hope for loving relationships. In a perverse kind of way, the lack of interpersonal and intrapersonal development perpetuates a dependency on God that can be truly dysfunctional.

Contradictions

In fundamentalist Christianity, the spiritual kingdom of God is described metaphorically as a family. God is a heavenly father, Jesus is the dutiful son, union with God is called marriage, the church is a bride, people who are saved become his children, the church community is called a family, and fellow members are called brothers and sisters in the Lord. (Notice that there is no mother. I find this puzzling and disturbing.) This image of an ideal family would imply all that is good about a loving and nurturing family—a healthy family's not a dysfunctional one. This is what Christian children are expected to believe about God's family and want to be a part of.

Sadly, however, there is no apparent drive in fundamentalist families to emulate this ideal in human terms. The idea of spiritual family is external, ideal, futuristic, and beyond personal responsibility, entirely separate from one's real family. Thus it becomes possible to excuse, even justify, much hypocrisy. The family can be non-nurturing and even abusive, because the human family is not the one that really counts. Indeed, continuing family dysfunctions merely reinforce teachings about original sin and human depravity. Yet when behaviors do not match stated beliefs, children see the contradiction, and they suffer the damage. The metaphor of the family is subverted by the reality of the family.

Fantasy and Denial

Since the entire fundamentalist system of thinking is absolutist in character, it is very threatening, and often impossible, for fundamentalist Christians to admit and examine areas of unhappiness in themselves. Problems or doubts are simply considered sin, and the Christian strives to be “victorious.” There is no value placed on reflection or awareness of areas for personal growth. Thus important emotional and behavioral issues are not examined

and a pattern of denial develops. Troubling philosophical questions, feelings of unfulfillment, and “un-Christian” experiences such as anger or greed have to be denied. Hints of such feelings are quickly taken to God in prayer by the more conscientious, but in that process they are essentially dismissed rather than dealt with. All this becomes a fantasy that grows and must be protected—a fantasy that all is well. To fail to support this fantasy would be to question one’s core reality. And this can be overwhelming.

The same process can happen in fundamentalist families. The parents, who must also believe that all is well, maintain this system of fantasy. Problems which would appear blatant to the outside observer simply go unnoticed and, consequently, unaddressed, because these parents *cannot* admit any fault. Thus the dynamic is not so much willingness to neglect or children, but an outright blindness to problems.

This kind of denial can be even more intense than what occurs in nonreligious abusive families that are incapable of processing the truth. This is because the religious person would have to examine his or her foundations in order to admit imperfection. Values and assumptions about reality and the meaning of life would have to be assessed. If the family is hurting, then something must be seriously wrong. The spiritual system may be inadequate (since problems are considered spiritual rather than human), and if so, then God must be inadequate—and then all is lost. The resulting panic would be devastating.

Denial is not only easier and less painful in this kind of belief system, but absolutely necessary, a matter of life and death. For families who lean entirely on religion for their security and meaning, the creation of fantasy well being becomes critical and omnipresent. A child who tries to say that the emperor has no clothes doesn't stand a chance. Charles, a missionary kid, relates the following story:

As a child I fought constantly with my siblings. I couldn’t get any help when I talked to Mom about my older sister. I experienced her as cruel, and I learned to fight back in ways that made me

ashamed of myself. As I got older, true to the family pattern, I was hard on my little brother. He went to Mom and said that I hated him. Mom said, “No, he doesn't hate you,” and dismissed it, even though that is what I had said.

At a recent family gathering, my younger brother jokingly told the story about going to Mom with this. Mom's response was “That's not true!” Yet I know that my brother spent many years feeling hated by me.

I asked Mom about our early years, about what it was like to have three small children and be so busy with work. I tried to empathize with the pressure she must have felt in juggling family and career, but to no avail. Mom said, “I didn't neglect my children!” She couldn't even imagine that there was any issue that could have affected her children.

In another conversation, I pointed out that there were no close relationships between the siblings. Some of us barely speak. We avoid each other, and when there is contact, the hostility is so close to the surface that it flares up at the slightest provocation. She denied every example. She only felt criticized and incredulous that I would make things up. In her mind, the family was fine in the past and is still fine.

The next day she avoided me. After that, when I indicated that we were not finished, she smiled her dismissal, kissed me, and said that we should look forward to good things in the future. Slam. End of story.

Physical and Sexual

I see an awful lot of suppressed anger in fundamentalists—which is expressed politically. It's also expressed toward children, who are treated in ferocious ways “You *will* behave. You will do these

kinds of behaviors: If you don't, you are a heathen and you'll be rejected. You're not to be loved. You'll be punished and rejected.”

I think that anger is submerged and appears in family behaviors that are really destructive. And the kids suffer the most, I think, from that twisting and guilt tripping—an awful lot of fear. Instead of getting security, you get guilt and fear laid on you.

— Kevin

In a family system focused on control rather than nurturing, enforcing obedience can become so all-important that occurs. The can be emotional, mental, physical, and even sexual. The religious belief system may not directly cause the, but it does provide the basic assumptions that lead to the prevailing power orientation in the first place. The fundamentalist worldview fosters the personal insecurity and interpersonal distrust that can contribute to this family dysfunction. *Principles* are considered more important than *persons*. Soon people, especially children, are dishonored and hurt.

Physical punishment is sanctioned in the Bible and therefore accepted as legitimate:

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Proverbs 13:24)

Blows that wound cleanse away evil; strokes make clean the innermost parts. (Proverbs 21:30)

Some parents take this to extremes. In his book, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*, Philip Greven (1992), a professor of history at Rutgers University, says that the roots of America's unusually angry, violent, and crime-ridden society lie in the country's Judeo-Christian heritage. Greven examines cases of childhood punishment and the rationales for physical punishment among those with strong Protestant conviction. The latter usually boil down to the belief that it is necessary for parents to break the will of their children to

gain their respect and obedience. In reality, he says physical assault only breeds rage and hostility, with negative outcomes.

Megan's experience of growing up in a fundamentalist family provides graphic illustration of this dysfunction. The physical was also coupled with massive emotional abuse.

My father would talk about Christian charity, but he was unforgiving, judgmental, and punitive. His religion was a wonderful way to control other people, especially his children.

He never respected his children. We would have differences of opinion. He knew that I was going through a period of questioning when I was in my teens, from about thirteen on. He would ask me pointed questions at the dinner table. And he knew I would give him an honest answer. It was a setup. If I told him, no, I didn't agree with that, then I was seated on the couch and grilled. It would be an argument, like a debate. He'd change the rules all the time. He never fought fair. He'd contradict himself. It was real crazy making. It usually ended about five or six hours later, at about eleven or twelve at night. I still wouldn't agree with him, and he would simply take his belt off and beat me and send me to bed because I wouldn't say I believed in Christ. I went through that for about six years as a teenager, about three or four times a week.

I can remember one night trying really desperately to sleep and not being able to. I was really panic-stricken and I came out. I was afraid that if I died in the middle of the night in my sleep, that I would go to hell. I said I was afraid to die and my dad's answer was, "Well, I guess you better pray harder." He delighted in the fact that I was terrified of death.

I did very little dating. But when I was seventeen we did go out a couple of times. A guy took me to a movie, and we came back by midnight but I didn't go in. We sat in the car for a little while and

kissed a bit. When I went into the house, my parents were waiting for me. My dad was furious that I was such a whore. I was taken into the back bedroom, and he beat me. My mother sat there and screamed, "Hit her again, Harry, hit her again!"

There was a point in time when I was forbidden to take walks with my brother. I was told it was because I was corrupting him and he would go to hell, too.

Family therapist Vicky Whipple (1987) reports that fundamentalist wives have difficulty stopping the cycle of violence in their marital relationships because of religious beliefs about marriage and sex-role stereotypes. She says professionals need to recognize the power of the fundamentalist subculture to maintain these stereotypes, since they are a key factor in violent relationships. Moreover, fundamentalist clergy are likely to be unsupportive or to even unknowingly endanger battered women because of legalistic attitudes.

Sexual abuse occurs in a surprising number of strict religious families. In addition to the usual reasons for sexual abuse in dysfunctional families, certain attitudes about sex may contribute to the problem. A religious belief system creates strong prohibitions against sex outside the family. If sex is repressed and frustration develops, it may seem less risky to sexualize the relationship with one's own children than risk condemnation from those outside the family. Many pious parents care a great deal about community opinion. If they are able to rationalize their behavior in the privacy of home, this is less of a concern than risking the *appearance* of sin.

Additionally, sexual abuse can occur because the belief system permits a father to be an authoritarian head of household. The Christian wife is less likely to question or interfere with his behavior. Children are expected to be obedient. They are taught to revere their parents, especially their fathers, as the authority next in line to Christ. For this reason, it is easy for children to be trusting and cooperative with sexual abuse. And if they are hurt, they often feel very confused and blame themselves.

Pat's story illustrates a religious family that allowed abuse. She struggled for many years before she realized the true nature of her problems and got the help she needed. For her, the church's habit of spiritualizing all issues had a devastating effect of her life.

I was raised in a small town in the Bible belt. I always had the feeling that if I was a good enough girl; I might get to go to heaven. But I always had a lot of guilt. I was sexually abused by my father. So I started out at age five learning to hate myself. I felt bad and guilty. And yet our family was very religious. We went to church every Sunday and my father read the Bible every night after dinner. The abuse went on for nine years until I was fourteen.

Then I grew up and married a man who was about as narrow as you can get. We moved out west and visited different churches but ended up in the charismatic Pentecostal churches. I was in that for many years, and all those years, I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know it had come from my childhood. I thought it was my entire fault—which I must not be a good enough Christian or the devil must be attacking me. I was one of those people that was always coming forward to be saved or rededicated or something. Anytime there was an invitation, I was up there, crying. I was always getting worked up emotionally. I had all these emotional needs; it was almost like a fix. But the root of the problem was still inside me.

When I asked for help, I was told that I must have more faith; that I just needed to read my Bible more and pray more and always be to church when it's open and do my tithes. And it was like there must be something wrong with me or I couldn't be having these problems in my life. And of course that made it worse because then I hated myself even more. I always felt guilty and full of fear.

When I was turning forty, I had a nervous breakdown. I was destroying myself, just getting more physically and emotionally ill. My doctor told me “ I don’t know how to tell you this, but I believe you have suicidal tendencies.” I just stared at him because I was in such denial: “I’m a spiritual Christian. I speak in tongues, I can’t be suicidal.” But I saw a Christian psychologist, who probably saved my life.

After that, I saw a therapist who specialized in incest. Then I really took off—learning to love myself, being able to make my own choices, take responsibility for my life. I finally got to the point, after being in therapy for five years, that I realized both my marriage and the church were destructive to me and that I had to get out.

Family Health Versus Dysfunction

If you were raised in a fundamentalist home, you might call yourself an “adult child of fundamentalists” or ACOF. Some of the dynamics of these families (including some of the dynamics described earlier in the chapter) are similar to those of other dysfunctional families, such as families of alcoholics. You may even share some of the traits known to adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs). For example, denial is strong in both of these systems and the same prohibitions occur against perceiving, feeling, and expressing. Thus you may have difficulties in these areas. Understanding the attributes of both healthy and unhealthy family functioning is important in your recovery—in gaining compassion for what you did not get as a child, and in proactively developing your own family system. Without taking creative responsibility, it becomes all too easy to simply repeat the patterns you are familiar with.

Because families provide a central context for human beings to grow and develop, many people have sought to identify the characteristics of healthy and dysfunctional families. The chart below summarizes these traits based on the work of Bradshaw (1988), Satir (1972), Whitfield (1987), and my

own clinical experience. Families rarely fit either of these descriptions exactly. But these distinctions can be useful for heightening your awareness. As you read the list, think about what your family was like on each dimension. You might also want to underline those words and phrases that apply to your family.

Healthy Family	Dysfunctional Family
<i>Communication:</i> clear, consistent, direct, specific, and congruent; opening and listening were practiced	<i>Communication:</i> unclear, indirect, vague, inconsistent, incongruent, secretive; concerns not listened to; facade of normality.
<i>Rules:</i> clear, up-to-date, yet flexible, humane rules; freedom to comment on anything; guidance and structure firm, but negotiable when appropriate.	<i>Rules:</i> covert, out-of-date, vague, inhumane, inflexible and rigid or wishy-washy and confusing; restrictions on commenting.
<i>Individuality:</i> respected and encouraged; each member free to have own perceptions, thoughts, feelings, desires.	<i>Individuality:</i> suppressed, conformity demanded, often subtly; criticism, manipulation used to control it.
<i>Feelings:</i> accepted and expressed.	<i>Feelings:</i> not accepted or expressed.
<i>Needs:</i> accepted, supported, and fulfilled.	<i>Needs:</i> not permitted.
<i>Self-esteem:</i> encouraged and supported; methods to gain approval are natural, positive, reasonable.	<i>Self-esteem:</i> discouraged; shame, judging, and competition used to control it; forms of gaining approval are negative, can be exaggerated.

Affection: freely given and received, verbally and physically; assumption of abundance.

Affection: withheld, measured, uncomfortable; assumption of scarcity; can be inappropriately expressed with sexual abuse.

Physical bodies: respected; sexuality treated as positive and natural; privacy honored.

Physical bodies: ignored, criticized, abused; sexuality shameful and secretive; privacy not respected.

Character: family members are honest, self-aware, accepting of responsibility; welcome feedback

Character: family members play roles such as martyr or victim; unaware, blaming, hypocritical, avoiding; feedback unacceptable.

Expectations: reasonable; mistakes forgivable and viewed as learning tool.

Expectations: unreasonable and inconsistent; mistakes seen as failure, cause for blame and ridicule.

Humor: plentiful and friendly, light, well-intentional, bonding.

Humor: biting, sarcastic, veils unexpressed feelings, causes alienation.

Atmosphere: pleasant, fun-loving, spontaneous, relaxed, reliable.

Atmosphere: tense, unpleasant, controlled, serious; can be chaotic, unpredictable.

Relationships: trusting and loving; equal in value.

Relationships: suspicious and individuals jealous; powers struggles for value.

Power: negotiated and shared; roles fluid and flexible, decision-making varies.

Power: rigid roles, patriarchal hierarchy.

Problems: acknowledged and resolved; conflict handled openly and creatively.

Problems: denied and perpetuated; conflict feared and avoided, erupting dangerously.

Interaction: with community and external world is open and trusting; new ideas welcomed as stimulating; children leave home with comfort and confidence.

Interaction: with world is minimal; outside involvement considered intrusive and dangerous; family system is closed, fearful, unhealthy; leaving home is problematic.

Goal: to promote health, happiness, and full development of all members.

Goals: control and survival of family unit.

In this type of family: children learn constructive behaviors that are appropriate to the real world; they grow in self-worth and confidence, drawing increasingly from the self.

In this type of family: children learn accidental, chaotic, destructive behaviors; they grow more doubtful, leaning more heavily on outside sources for support.

Exercise 6.1: Assessing Family Functioning

If you had a fundamentalist or another authoritarian family upbringing, it is likely that you experienced at least some of the family problems described in this chapter. Since individual families vary, you can gain clarity on your own experience by reviewing the following list of characteristics and assessing the functioning of your family.

Family Characteristics Checklist

Directions: For each item, mark the number that best reflects the extent to which the statement reflects the truth of your family life as a child. For example, mark 1 if the statement is untrue, 2, 3, or 4 if it is somewhat true; and 5 if it describes your family “to a T.”

My family attended church without fail	1 2 3 4 5
My parents' beliefs coincided with what I learned at church	1 2 3 4 5

Shame was used as a form of discipline in my family	1 2 3 4 5
Feelings were devalued or ignored in my family	1 2 3 4 5
A "higher purpose" was emphasized in my family	1 2 3 4 5
My parents avoided the responsibility of meeting my emotional needs	1 2 3 4 5
Control was a high priority in my family	1 2 3 4 5
Independent thought was stifled in my family	1 2 3 4 5
My parents' behavior contradicted their beliefs	1 2 3 4 5
Denial and an underlying fantasy were important in my family	1 2 3 4 5
Physical abuse occurred in my family	1 2 3 4 5
Sexual abuse occurred in my family	1 2 3 4 5

Exercise 6.2: Recalling the Past

Using what you have learned about your family's functioning from the checklist and the chart comparing functional and dysfunctional family characteristics (as well as the other reading in this chapter), write about your own experience of growing up. For example, did your parents show affection openly, listen when you expressed concerns or explored new ideas, teach you how to handle conflict, and foster a sense of self-esteem? Or were these things controlled or swept under the rug? Which do you think was more important in your family, tolerance or judgment? In retrospect, do you think your parents' view of the family was realistic or a fantasy created in order to keep the family together?

Take your time with this. Take each element of the chart and each statement on the checklist in turn, and write as much as you can about that aspect of your family. This process may be somewhat difficult and perhaps painful as

you remember old wounds and resentments and begin to realize some of the ways your family fell short of the ideal.

The goal here is to try to remember and re-create what it was like for you as a child, growing up in your family. Remember that becoming more aware of this will aid your healing. It is not a matter of blame. In the following chapters, we will be working with your inner child, the part of you that remains the child you were, with all of his or her hurts and disappointments—and a child's ability to grow and enjoy life. In those chapters, you will begin to learn how to provide for yourself the kind of positive parenting you were denied as a child and continue to need.

When you write about this, use a third person voice, as if you are writing a story about someone else. So, for example, “Susan was always confused about how her parents could go to church and then come home and fight,” or “Jerry found that it was not possible to ever talk about sex with his parents.” Writing this way may seem awkward and strange but it is very useful for gaining clarity and compassion.

A Note About Relationship Issues

You are probably also very concerned about your present relationships with family members. Leaving the fold can have a huge impact and you will want to sort out the changes. This is understandable and will require your attention in time. Bear in mind that after you have achieved some personal healing and growth, you will be more able to improve relationships with others, including family and friends. You will need to resolve the issues that have developed, either directly with them or within yourself. Developing new friendships will mean changing some of the attitudes you have learned about other people and letting go of perfectionism. Your intimate relationships will certainly be affected by changes in your spiritual life.

There are no easy solutions and space does not permit a full treatment of this topic in this book. As you grow in your ability to parent yourself and take responsibility for your life, you will gain skills that you need for healthy relationships. You can achieve peace with your parents and former

associates in a way that will work for you. The Appendix has some suggestions for reading about relationships.

The following poem was written by a woman who reached an internal resolution of her childhood conflict with her father. Importantly, she was able to let go only after honoring and working through her own pain.

Arcus Senilus

Elegant Latin, elliptical sound
for that cloudy constellation of old age,
Milky Way circling the iris,
light of moments light years past
finally travelled here;
sparks, unnumbered distant stars flowering
around the gateway
to my father's soul.

As a child forced to stare
into his eyes, all I could see
was one dark star,
devouring implosion
of cold grief, rage.

He would force me to sit
for hours, my eyes peeled open
in terror and defiance,
his words raging past,
fragments of scripture,
bits of broken logic like
a solar wind raising

the small hairs on my neck.
The heat of hellfire burned
thin, red lines where
the belt blows would finally fall.
I faced his words for hours,
rigid with anticipation,
broken before the blows ever fell
by my child love for him.

Dark silence
the only safe distance
I could accomplish,
I took years
moving to another universe.

This summer evening
sitting next to him at table
the same edges in his tone,
the same dark wind
sharpening those edges. But
I'm the practicing astronomer
arrested by these scars of age,
galaxies of moments
reaching me across deep time,
illuminating the larger meaning
of his life in as many small details
as I can recall or imagine:
The child's love discovering
the child.

— Greta Sauvageot

— May 21, 1993

Part II

Healing

I found out I'm not just full of the devil and in a dark dungeon; there's a lot of light down there inside of me and there's this innocent little girl in there. She was a scared little girl and I needed to learn how to take care of her so she won't be scared anymore or guilty. I needed to find my spiritual core and ask my inner advisor to guide me. The first time that I tried that, I found myself trapped in this dark, locked dungeon, like Daniel in the lion's den, with my parents screaming and telling me I was a bad girl. Then pretty soon, this door opened and I went through this dark tunnel where all my fears and everything are, and then I came out into this light. That never happened to me before. It was always dark for me. I had never felt that feeling that hope, that peace. So that's one of the ways I got rid of the nightmares—getting help from my inner advisor, my wise inner self.

— Kara

Chapter 7

The Damaged Inner Child

I think it's sad that a six-year-old girl goes to bed at night in mortal fear that the Rapture is going to take place and God is going to leave her behind. Just total, total fear. Those fears stayed with me. I would go shopping with my parents and if I lost them in the store, I was sure that Christ had come back and I was left. I've never talked to anybody who felt so frightened; who felt so scared all the time. That's no way for a little girl to grow up.

— Mary

A precious part within you is childlike in essence. It is the part of you that is open and innocent, receiving life with wide-open arms. This “inner child” is tender and vulnerable, impressionable and trusting. Your inner child wants to live and be happy. Full of eagerness and curiosity, the child takes what the world has to offer and believes what people say. Your child loves and wants to be loved; *needs* to be loved and cared for. This *inner child* is a useful and beautiful metaphor for your true self or core essence.

Programs for “healing the child within” were originally developed to work with adult survivors of childhood trauma. And even for those who do not specifically remember trauma as a child, the idea of recognizing and caring for an inner child has been extremely valuable.

This approach is very effective because, for most people, the image of a small child evokes feelings of compassion and thus makes self-love a little easier. Having a concrete symbol also facilitates the sometimes-ambiguous task of loving yourself. A child is deserving and well intentioned, despite making mistakes. It feels natural to be gentle and forgiving with a child, and we all still need to be treated that way. A child also has very basic, normal needs—for love, safety, fun, and learning. Thinking of yourself this way makes it “feel right” to advocate and care for yourself.

The concept of the inner child also applies perfectly to the problem of religious damage. Convincing a child he or she is bad does untold harm to basic self-esteem. The promises of fundamentalism, and many other faiths, appeal directly to the primitive security fears of a child. If you became religious as a child, you might remember the comfort of an all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful God taking care of you. He was your heavenly father and Santa Claus both, giving you all things and loving you forever.

On the other hand, the image of hellfire may have filled your child's mind with terror. In a child's way of thinking, it makes sense for the world to be black and white, for there to be a war between good and evil, and for behavior to deserve reward or punishment. If you received this kind of training early on, your resulting assumptions about reality may continue to affect you. Very small children are especially vulnerable to this and can incur long-term damage to their feeling and thought patterns. Because these early experiences are so embedded in the subconscious, you may have troubling thoughts and nightmares even now that you are out. Your inner child may still be scared. Mary remembers feeling tremendous fear as a child:

I was raised in a church where our minister loved Bible prophecy. Boom, boom, boom every Sunday, about what was going to happen in the world. I sat there as a little girl, just so fearful—Russia was going to do this and China was going to do that, and they're all going to come over and we're all going to be strung out on racks and tortured for Christ. I didn't want to be tortured. Now I don't think about it. When I hear the news, I go "Forget it!" I don't think. I can't allow myself to think. It's too painful. It brings back too many fears that I don't want to deal with.

Satan was a very real person, walking around trying to devour us. He was always trying to make us sin to make God unhappy. Every time we did something bad, it was credit to Satan. Satan was a very real power. I was scared to death of demons. You

know now people watch those demon movies? I told my husband,
“You can watch those if you want to. You don't know how real
that is to me.”

Mary has worked on her anxiety and copes by trying not to think about any spiritual issues. The sad thing is that she wants to explore her feelings about God, but the fear makes it very difficult. Mary's experiences were of an actual child growing up in a religious family. But that same damage can occur to your inner child. One thirty-year-old mother described to me her brief involvement with fundamentalism during her college years. Her motivation for joining was primarily social, but she was thoroughly indoctrinated. After graduation, she left the belief system for a period of time, but was drawn back to church temporarily when she became lonely and anxious. Years later, she has anxiety attacks when her inner child remembers certain teachings and worries about death.

Contacting Your Inner Child

Whether you were introduced to religious concepts at a young age or later, they made an impression on your childlike core self.

Even if you now rationally believe in your own self-worth, you may still notice the effects of an unconscious feeling of worthlessness. You may feel undeserving at times or guilty for unknown reasons. You might find yourself expecting the worst, surprised at good fortune, or embarrassed by praise. Yet think about the assumptions that are inherent in these feelings! If you imagine a small child with these thoughts and feelings, you can get a sense of the damage that has occurred.

If your inner child were your own biological child, wouldn't you want that child to feel good and valuable? You would want this to be a natural, comfortable assumption. Just as flowers and trees and animals are beautiful and deserving of life, human children should feel unself-consciously positive about themselves. A healthy child also has a seemingly limitless capacity for play. This is another trait to preserve through out life.

Nature provides an important lesson here. Birds and squirrels and other animals do not have to work hard to earn their right to be alive. They simply live. They sing and frolic as they please. They belong on the earth. But many humans live their lives as though happiness has to be earned. Your damaged inner child tries hard. Your child tries to do the right thing to be loved and be happy. Somehow it doesn't feel like it's enough simply to *be*. To be good, it seems that life should require effort.

This is the child within you that needs to be recognized and accepted. Finding your child again will be your first step in your healing process. You need to love your inner child unconditionally!

Exercise 7.1: Innocent Child Visualization

Visualization is a technique for drawing upon your unconscious mind for healing and change. The mind processes a great deal of information in nonverbal ways, which though unconscious are nonetheless quite powerful. Imagery has been called the language of the unconscious. Visualization uses that language to enable the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind to communicate.

Visualization exercises are used here and elsewhere in this book to work on deeply lodged ideas and feelings. The idea is to use carefully designed visualizations to redirect the power of your imagination—to “reprogram” your unconscious. Otherwise, if you do nothing, you could re-main locked into past assumptions.

Visualization that is creative and healing is most likely to occur when you are relaxed. Just as your body is wise enough to digest food and heal itself, the mind is self-healing when it is relatively free from stress and rigid control. In order to get maximum benefit from guided visualizations then, it is important to begin with relaxation. Yet you probably recall serious reservations in fundamentalism about relaxing mental controls. The parable of seven demons moving in to inhabit the freshly cleaned house was used as an argument against having a relaxed or open mind. Thus, your first challenge with these exercises will be to assume positive things about your

basic nature and have faith in your mental processes. It's really okay to relax.

The purpose of this first visualization is to find your inner child and make a loving contact. You might also learn something about your child or even learn from your child.

As you do this exercise, be open to visualizing your present inner child, that is, the image of the child within you now. This is not the same as the historical child you once were, so you may or may not look, feel, or act the same as you did then.

First read over the following script carefully, so that you understand the procedure. Then, speaking slowly, record it on a tape.

When you are relaxed and ready to do the visualization, be sure to listen to it with your eyes closed and give yourself enough time for each part, pausing the tape as needed.

Begin by finding a comfortable position for your body and gently settling down. Then close your eyes ... take several long, deep breaths, allowing yourself to release tension each time you exhale ... Inhale ... relax ... inhale ... relax ... inhale ... relax ... letting the relaxation extend to your fingertips and toes, letting go completely ... opening up ... feeling more safe and secure as your body relaxes even more ... And as your body relaxes, your spirit can relax as well, following the wisdom in your body. Your body is very wise, and your emotions can follow ... letting your mind take this time to rest ... plenty of time ... no need to do anything ... nothing to figure out ... This is time for you ... a special time to give to yourself ... no hurry ... breathing deeply, settling down even more ... feeling good.

Let your mind drift ... and gradually, you find yourself in a beautiful meadow ... grass ... flowers ... trees around the edges ... The weather is pleasant ... you can hear the breeze gently in the

grass and trees ... you can feel the air on your skin ... so comfortable and cool ... The birds fly about chirping and singing, resting on branches of trees ... a rabbit scampers by, playfully joining others in the bushes ... squirrels and chipmunks explore curiously ... and a lizard basks in the sun on a rock ... You take your time observing the life in this beautiful place, natural and perfect ... The plants are growing perfectly in rhythm with the seasons ... the water in a nearby stream makes a steady musical sound ... the animals play and find food, and care for their young ...all at a natural, easy pace ... And you find yourself feeling very good here, at home ... you are part of nature too ... you touch the ground ... you breathe in the fresh air ... you notice the colors ... you feel the textures ... You move around ... belonging here ... this earth is your home too ... and you begin to understand ... at a very deep level ... what it means to live ...to just be ... in the present ... letting go of concern ...feeling content in nature ... the cycle of the seasons ... the natural changes ... the beauty of growth.> And as you let yourself join this meadow, you notice, not far away, a small child playing in the meadow ... And you realize, as you look, that this child is you ... as natural and innocent as the other living creatures in this place ... And you watch quietly, appreciating and learning ... this child is your essence ... your inner self.

Take your time ... let your heart be open ... and when you are ready, you can approach your child and be together ... in any way that you choose ... letting your child be comfortable ... talking perhaps ... getting acquainted ... or just being together ...doing whatever feels right ... holding ... or playing ... sharing ... this is your time ... you can lie in the grass ... run through the flowers ... climb a tree ... watch the birds ... play with the squirrels ... You belong here and you can enjoy life ... When you feel finished for now, you can gradually bring yourself back to this time and place

... bringing your child back with you in your heart ... and agreeing to meet again like this ... to continue learning ... and growing closer ... opening up and enjoying life more and more ... as you count backward from 5 ... you can return here and be alert ... feeling refreshed and rested from taking this time to care for yourself ... 5 ... 4 ... taking a deep breath ... 3 ... moving a bit ... 2 ... getting ready to sit up and open your eyes ... and 1, returning.

What Is Your Child Like?

The innocent child visualization can create a variety of emotions.

While you may be glad to make contact with your inner child and have a warm sense of reunion, you might also be aware of some problems. Because you were taught to rely on an outside source for love and caring, it probably feels unfamiliar and perhaps awkward to give to yourself now.

Some people, during this visualization, experience themselves as the *child*, rather than as an adult relating to the child. (An alternative visualization at the end of the chapter uses just that experience.) This is natural, considering the feelings and needs that you probably have right now in your life. Remember that you were taught to *be* as a child, in order to be saved. Unfortunately this went beyond innocence, trust and humility and likely resulted in your giving away your power and becoming dependent. You were not taught to retain or develop an “adult self” to take care of the child.

But your inner child is not alone and helpless in the world. Your child has *you*, and you are rich with inner resources to nurture and guide, as we will explore in the next chapter. At this point, identifying with the child in this exercise is a valuable first step. Use it to empathize with the child, to find out more clearly what your child needs by feeling your child's experience from the inside.

You may not know the inner child part of yourself very well. You were probably taught to think of yourself last. Yet loving and caring for yourself is critical. It does not mean selfishness. It means taking responsibility for

your own being, for the child within that has been entrusted to your care. You are the only one who has the awareness to understand and respond to this child's needs. You *can* give yourself the love, protection, and guidance that your child deserves. Later chapters of this book address the skills involved in fulfilling this responsibility.

You may also have noticed other reactions during the visualization exercise. Your child may have been very sad, angry, or distrusting. These are important feelings to notice. They are understandable when you think about your life experience. Rather than pushing these awarenesses away, let them sink in and help you really understand the trauma that you have been through. It is as if you are adopting a real traumatized child—you want to accept the feelings and know the facts of the child's history. Only then can you be an informed and caring adult in this *re-parenting process*.

For example, when Melissa visualized her inner child, she found a naked little girl, huddled in a corner, who did not talk or want comfort. Knowing that this child had been very hurt, Melissa simply accepted her feelings, told her everything would be okay, and promised not to leave. In later visualizations, they made more contact, and the relationship was eventually healed. The important aspect of this first step was Melissa's willingness to be open and accepting.

Some people experience a profound sadness during this exercise, much like grieving for a lost childhood. In truth, many grown-ups have lost the ability to relax and play. Life can take on a seriousness that feels quite heavy at times. If you were raised in a religious context, you were probably confronted with many serious issues at an early age and expected to make “responsible” choices about matters of cosmic importance. This could certainly have robbed you of the freedom and magic of those precious years. You needed to play! And you still need to play and enjoy life. The sadness can be good information for you, letting you know about a change you need to make. Our emotions are great messengers.

When Fred visualized his inner child, he remembered a favorite child-hood activity:

It made me remember something very comforting to me; it was in a vacant lot near my home. I was a grammar school kid in California. There was a plant that grew there we called fillery. I loved to go and get in the stuff. It was deep, and I liked to just wallow—lie there and smell the stuff. You could take the seed-pods and pierce one of them and then put another one through and make a little thing like a pair of scissors. Now why I would remember that ... I thought about the occasions of my childhood, and that one just gripped me, so I stayed there. Afterward I felt very sad. I think I felt sorry for the loss of not having many experiences now like going to the fillery patch.

After the visualization, Fred realized he could go to a place he knew of in the present, and enjoy the outdoors in a similar way. Though a busy professional in his late fifties, he learned from his child to take the time to just be instead of always striving.

Being in nature may not have been a pleasant experience in this visualization. Since many religious children are not taught to respect or enjoy the natural world, you may find it difficult to connect with nature. Even though now you want to enjoy the world around you, you may find it hard to appreciate. If so, my suggestion is to be gentle with yourself. Do not judge your child for not frolicking with delight in the woods. If this is important to you, you can learn to appreciate nature.

You may have had negative feelings toward your child: impatience, annoyance, or actual rejection. Realize that these can be natural feelings when a relationship has not been nurtured. If you have not known how to love yourself, then you have not been paying attention to your child's needs. Given the way you were taught to think about human beings, you might even be disgusted by a needy, vulnerable child with all kinds of feelings and demands. The thought of being responsible may also be distasteful for you.

Remember that you have not yet learned the *joy* of caring for your child. You have not yet realized the thrill of empowerment in this task! For now, simply be patient and pay attention to your feelings so that you can better understand them.

This relationship with yourself will require healing. The neglect, perhaps even abuse, has been unintentional. If you have been critical and demanding of yourself, realize that you were not deliberately trying to create misery. If you have ignored your child's feelings, it is because you were not aware. You did the best you could with the knowledge and expectations that you had. In fact, the way you have treated yourself is most likely a repetition of how you were treated as a child.

Now you are taking time to learn more about self-care and establish a healthier primary relationship with yourself. Your child will come to trust you and communication will open. As you listen and attend to your child's needs, providing love, protection, and advocacy in finding good things in life, your child will blossom. Childlike enjoyment of life can be regained.

For instance, Jessica used visualization to remember what she liked as a child, so that she could provide better for her inner child in the present. She remembered being very social and having friends over for slumber parties. In her present life, she was a very serious professional and didn't take the time to be social. Contacting her child allowed her to realize that she had been wanting to have a dinner party for months but had been absorbed in her work. It was as if her inner child said, "Hey, can we have a dinner party?" and the mother, the adult, said "Yes, you can invite some friends over." Soon after, Jessica hosted a party and had a great time.

Exercise 7.2: Using Childhood Photos

If you have them, take another look at pictures from your childhood — yourself, family, friends, activities. You may want to get more pictures from family members. Looking at these can help you reconstruct more of your past and gain empathy for your inner child in the present. While your inner child is not exactly the same as your historical child, he or she may share

some things in common, and you can learn something about how to take care of yourself. When you look at the photos, notice the expressions on your face and the faces of others. What do you notice about the way people are relating to each other? What activities are going on? As an objective observer, what would you surmise about this child's life?

If you have a picture of yourself that you like, post it somewhere you will see it often—on a mirror, refrigerator, dresser top. This can help you remember to be aware of your present inner child. Carrying the picture where you'll see it when you open your wallet also works.

I often ask my clients to bring in old pictures or photo albums. We look at them together to get a better sense of the child's life, both then and now. Dan noticed that in family pictures, he was always the one looking very solemn. It matched his memories of sadness and withdrawal as the family scapegoat and his struggle with a judgmental, dogmatic father. He was surprised to see his isolation so clearly:

There is a picture of me when I was very young. I'm standing alone out in a vacant lot looking at some weeds. I know that someone had to take that picture, but still it stands for my childhood emotionally. As far back as I can remember, I have “been making it on my own.”

Monica found an attractive picture of herself at age three, and then saw the same little girl in her visualization of her inner child. The photo helped with the visualization exercise. Making contact with Little Monica felt like a reunion.

I could just see that three-year-old there in the meadow. She was sitting on my lap and we had our arms around each other—just that picture of that three-year-old and that cute smile. You know, I looked real happy in the picture; that three-year-old was real happy.

Exercise 7.3: Other Suggested Ideas

Here are a few suggestions for other ways of getting acquainted with your inner child:

Nature Walk. Take a walk by yourself in a natural setting that you enjoy. Let yourself relax and be childlike, experiencing all your senses. Be in the environment, feeling a part of it, enjoying your basic unity with the rest of nature, let your feet be connected to the earth. As you walk, use your imagination. If you like, you can stand and imagine yourself as a tree and feel your roots going deep into the earth. You can lie on your back and feel your whole body turning with the earth. As you look up at the sky and clouds, let your vision extend into space. Touch everything around you—soil, rocks, water, plants—enjoy the feeling of connectedness. You have time, you belong here, this is home.

Time with Children. As adults, we forget what children are like.

It gets hard to remember what we did as children and hard to imagine the way children think. A very pleasant way to refresh your memory is to spend time with small children. Even if you have children of your own, it is helpful to visit with other children. Many schools and preschools welcome volunteers. The kids themselves will surprise you with their welcome! Just be sure to play with them. Don't go in solely trying to teach them something. They can teach you a lot if you listen and observe. There are many ways to have contact with children—use your creativity and carve out the time! You'll be glad you did. This is a powerful way to build empathy for your inner child.

Parenting. If you have a child you have a perfect opportunity to pay attention to the nurturing process. As you hold and love your real child, you can vicariously experience the caring yourself. Megan expressed this well:

Having a child was a crucial part of my recovery. I was emotionally very close to Nathan. Being involved with him was an opportunity for me to look again at all those issues that had come up when I was a child and redefine them. By loving him, caring about him, I was able to prove to myself that yes, in fact, I

have been a special child and that I deserved to be loved and cared about that way. I wasn't a shameful creature. I really deserved that and I hadn't gotten it. But it wasn't my fault. And I redeemed all of that by being able to provide it for another human being. That's wonderful to find in yourself, within your spirit—the strength and the wisdom to provide for another person. To me, that was the most spiritual experience.

I think parenting is always an opportunity to take care of yourself. I was finally able to use that part of me, the part that was a good mother to Nathan, to finally substitute for the parents that I have. That was real important. That person is still there. I can go back and still find that person. There are some nights when I do—when I realize I need my “mom,” you know.

Assessing the Damage

The injury to your inner child will depend on the teachings you received from your family and your religious community. In general, the impact of rigid religion creates a denial of self. This can mean serious problems in developing emotional awareness and expression, acceptance of bodily functions and sexuality, intellectual reasoning abilities, and decision-making capability.

An easy way to evaluate these qualities in yourself is to consider the traits of a natural healthy child and to compare them with your own traits. I think of a child as having basic trust and security, free and easy expression of feelings, curiosity, creativity, and ability to give and receive affection, energy, eagerness, confidence, honesty, sociability, humor, and playfulness.

Particular beliefs, such as basic sinfulness and threat of hell, and approaches to life like black-and-white thinking and avoidance of personal responsibility can be devastating to the healthy development of your core self. If you have experienced these things, your inner child is hurt. You need to acknowledge this hurt to your inner child.

This may seem like a small thing but the effect can be powerful. A simple analogy is that of a small child coming to show you a cut on her finger. When you say, “Yes, I see that cut. It looks like it must really hurt,” she feels accepted. Her pain is honored, and she is strengthened. She can run off to play again. You can begin the process of healing by giving your inner child the gift of understanding, by saying, “Yes, I see what happened to you. You were really hurt.”

Exercise 7.4: Acknowledging the Injury

Write about your religious training and church experience. You can begin by free associating and taking down brief notes about all your miscellaneous memories. What were the key events and experiences? The ups and downs, the “victories” and struggles? This history can include both childhood and adulthood.

Now write objectively and with compassion about what your inner child carries from this experience. Take your time, and be as detailed as possible. These are the wounds you need to recognize in order to be healed. Again, write the story in a third person voice, e.g. “Jason went to church three times a week and never questioned it until he turned 13. . . “ Use extra paper if necessary.

When you are finished, imagine holding and comforting your inner child.

Exercise 7.5: Consulting an Inner Advisor

Caring for your inner child makes intuitive sense. As you will learn more about in the next chapter, self-nurturing is critical to your growth and wellbeing. However, sometimes it can be very difficult to be the grown-up.

If you are having a really bad day, you might feel very small and vulnerable and dearly wish to receive some nurturance. That is, you identify more with your inner child than with your adult self, and—no matter how much you might want to—you can't seem to force yourself to feel strong enough to turn around and take care of your child.

At such a time, a different strategy works beautifully. You simply turn the process around and do your self-care from the other direction. That is, you let yourself be the child. In addition, you imagine another part of you that is a very wise and compassionate being. This is your “inner advisor,” a symbol of your deep inner resources. Because your mind understands imagery, you can get support from the wisest and most loving friend that you could possibly have—yourself.

As you did for the earlier visualization exercise, read over this script carefully and speaking then in a slow, steady voice, record it. Because the words are directed to your inner child, speak gently and lovingly, as though to a needy child.

Let yourself get comfortable and gently close your eyes. As you relax, take some nice deep breaths, gradually letting go of everything around you so you can go inside ... This is a special time ... there's no hurry ... Just relax and breathe.

As you feel more settled, you can let your mind take you on an imaginary journey ... to a personal place outdoors ... A place that you like ... a place that feels good to you ... Let it be a place where you can be alone and comfortable ... Where you feel safe...

For a few minutes, take your time to enjoy this place ... walking around if you like ... enjoying what you see and feel ... noticing any sounds or smells ... breathing and relaxing...

When you are ready, settle in a comfortable place and get ready for a nice surprise. Pretty soon you will meet someone who will be a very special friend to you. It will be a person or an animal, or

you might even see a light. This special friend knows you very well already and cares about you very much. You can call this being your inner advisor, because he or she will be able to give you wise advice about anything you like. Your advisor will also be very loving to you and can help you feel better.

When you feel ready to meet your inner advisor, you will gradually notice that you are not alone ... Look around and see who it is that has come to be with you ... It could be someone walking toward you ... or maybe sitting down beside you ... You feel good because this special friend is here to help you. When your advisor has arrived, take whatever time you want to get acquainted ... You can talk about your feelings if you want ... You can get a hug ... Or you can ask a question ... Take all the time you need for this ... and enjoy this time together.

Your inner advisor is strong and wise and caring. After you have taken this time, you will feel stronger, and happier, more peaceful and sure of yourself, ready to continue your day.

It's also good to know that your inner advisor is someone you can get to know and have for a friend in the future ... So take your time to talk and get to know each other ... Be sure to ask for anything you need today ... And when you feel finished, thank your advisor for helping you, and plan to visit again sometime ... Take a nice deep breath ... and let yourself come back to your present time and place, opening your eyes and feeling refreshed.

Afterword

When my son, Ryan, was five years old, I was dismayed to realize that religious abuse can come from many sources. As a parent, I have tried to counteract these influences and help him preserve a healthy inner child.

I found Ryan one day watching TV, listening to a hellfire-and-damnation preacher. I asked Ryan what he thought, and he said the preacher was mean!

He heard the preacher say that we were all going to hell and would be taking everyone with us (even though the preacher's words were hard to make out, he was screaming so loud).

I asked Ryan what hell was. He pointed down, saying “Down there with the devil.” I asked if he was going there. He said no, he was going up (pointing) to heaven to be with God. He said that he had talked to God and asked for a tiny piece of Jesus to be inside him, and that would get him into heaven. Ryan then suggested my husband and I ask God for a tiny piece of Jesus so that we could be with him in heaven after we die.

At first it sounded benign, almost sweet—a small child talking with God and having a tiny piece of Jesus. A part of me actually wondered if he had been talking with God. Perhaps God was communicating with my innocent son in a way that was not possible with me anymore.

Then we asked for more details. How did Jesus get in? Where exactly was he in Ryan's body? Did Ryan do this on his own? When and where? We learned that while Ryan stayed at the home of a babysitter, he had been persuaded to kneel down and pray on her kitchen floor. This woman told Ryan that because of the bad things he had done, he would go to hell if he did not pray to God and ask for forgiveness. Ryan said that he was very embarrassed but that he did it because he was so afraid of going to hell. The piece of Jesus was to help him not to be naughty.

We asked him whether he had told his father when he got home (since he had been staying with his natural father at the time). Ryan said he had not because he did not want his father to say “Oh no!” (Clapping his hand on his forehead to demonstrate) and have to get on his knees too. “Then he would be so embarrassed too, and I didn't want to embarrass him.”

Ryan later showed me how he had to kneel and fold his hands and say a lot of “stupid stuff.” He asked, “Why did she make me pray like that, Mom?” I told Ryan I didn't know, but that in the future, if someone tells him to do something that he doesn't want to do or that feels embarrassing, that he is to refuse, saying simply “No way, forget it.” He was quite relieved. Tears

welled up in his eyes as I told him that he was a good boy and that there was no hell.

Chapter 8

Inner Healing

What I learned in therapy was basically that I just had to accept and love myself the way I was. It took more faith to believe that God loved me and accepted me just the way I was than the faith I had before. But it doesn't matter what you've done or anything, because all the punishing stuff they teach us isn't true. It doesn't matter how you approach it, as long as love is the source you believe in. That's what I believe.

— Sheri

After reading the last chapter, you probably have some awareness of your inner child and the hurts you have experienced. To heal and grow, you will need to learn how to love and trust yourself. This means learning to listen to your own inner wisdom, and learning to tap into your own inner resources of strength and love. Your “inner adult” has this ability.

The Adult

The idea of having inner resources may seem at first foreign and difficult to accept because you have learned always to seek help from outside yourself. Yet several things confirm their existence and value. Your body has incredible, innate knowledge. Your cells know how to reproduce themselves, nourish the body, and fight infection. When you cut yourself, you don't have to tell your blood cells to clot or monitor your skin to see that it heals. Your body knows exactly what to do and it goes to work for you.

On a purely physical level, you have these astonishing capabilities for healing. Why should you not have equally amazing intuitive knowledge about your mental and emotional life? And, if that is the case, you are the best source of guidance for running your own life, just as your own body makes the best decisions about how to run itself.

The problem for most people is simply that they do not know much about tapping into their own inner wisdom. You are probably familiar with the experience of talking to a friend about a problem and knowing exactly what the friend could say that would be most helpful to you. Sometimes you may not realize this until you have already asked for advice. Sometimes you are aware of knowing the response you need, and you ask anyway, hoping the friend will confirm it for you. This knowledge is the voice of your own inner wisdom speaking.

People use different labels for this inner voice, calling it the inner advisor, the higher self, the inner guide, or the god within. Meanings differ slightly, but the central idea is that you have within the resources to guide and care for yourself. In the terminology of this book, the “adult” is this part of self that is wise and compassionate and capable of caring for the “child.”

The child represents the part of you that possesses basic needs and reacts naturally and nakedly to every situation. The adult is the part of you that is able to *process* needs and reactions. The adult can listen and understand the feelings of the child, consider the demands of the world, and decide on an appropriate course of action. Roughly speaking, the child represents feeling and the adult represents thinking. Without the adult, the child is unprotected. Without the child, the adult can get out of touch with true needs and feelings.

You might recognize the characteristics of a person with an unprotected child: impulsive, oversensitive, or fearful. The person who has repressed his or her child can be overly serious, insensitive, overcontrolled, or dominated by externally derived values. Ideally, a person has a healthy, spontaneous child and a loving, responsible adult. A balance between the two constitutes a positive relationship within the self. When both adult and child are active and aware, you have *full access to yourself*. You have the information and energy you need to steer your life in whatever direction you desire.

These concepts may seem awkward and strange at first, as if you have to split yourself in half. Bear in mind that we are using a metaphor simply to

make it possible for you to grasp these dynamics. The adult and child are not different personalities within you, nor are they good or bad. Both are closely interrelated, positive, powerful, and necessary to health. The child provides critical data about basic needs and natural feelings, while the adult figures out how to take care of those needs and feelings. The adult is the advocate for the child.

For some people, the words *adult* and *child* are loaded with connotations that can become obstacles. You may find it easier to use *Big* and *Little*, which also imply the nurturing that is so crucial. For example, Jeff described an experience this way:

After leaving the church, it was hard to handle other kinds of social situations. I went to the party and realized that Little Jeff was pretty scared about meeting new people, so I took some time out. Big Jeff took him outside for a few minutes and provided some reassurance. I felt much better after that. My Little felt safe knowing that if it really got bad, my Big could simply take him home, and it would be okay. Big Jeff also reminded Little Jeff about my good points, so it was easier to be friendly to people.

Note: In this book, I will continue to use the term *child* because, in general, its connotation is positive and easily understood. It implies innocence, vulnerability, naturalness, energy, and spontaneity. Likewise, adult implies a mature, wise, caring, and capable entity. For shorthand, I will also sometimes use Big and Little.

Building a New Relationship

Central to your healing process will be establishing a new relationship with yourself. Your adult may feel frustrated when trying to get to know your child. Furthermore, it would be highly unusual if your adult did not feel nervous and inadequate about taking on this responsibility. Stacy noticed a variety of reactions when she visualized her inner child:

There was an odd touch of sadness, and yet I felt kind of happy and satisfied. It was kind of good to see the child, but there was sadness. I don't have children, so it was kind of hard to hold a child and watch it play.

It is important to realize that your adult does not have to be a perfect parent all of a sudden. If and when you feel in doubt about your parenting abilities, remember that this is a new set of skills. Like anything else—reading, cooking, driving, or building a house—it takes time and effort to learn it. Your child will accept this and will be glad to have you take charge, even if you aren't “perfect.”

You begin this new relationship by reaching out and getting to know your child, as you did in the exercises in Chapter 7, particularly in the innocent child visualization. Repeat this visualization as many times as necessary to bring you and your child closer.

Remember that relaxation and visualization are skills that improve with practice. In everyday life, we rarely go inside ourselves in this way. It may feel strange, at first, and it may be difficult to maintain your concentration. Yet as you become familiar with the method, you will be surprised at how easy and powerful it can be. The following exercises are designed to help you to continue getting to know your child.

Exercise 8.1: Staying in Touch

At the beginning of each day, take ten minutes to check in with your child. Close your eyes and imagine being together in a comfortable place. Find out how your child is feeling and what might be needed. Talk with your child about the coming day, the love you feel, and what care you will provide. Promise to check in periodically during the day and stay close.

Keep a small notebook with you to record each time you attend to your child. Roughly translated, this means checking in with your own feelings. Make an entry in your notebook, indicating the time of day, the circumstances, how you are feeling, and your best guess as to the reason for

that feeling. Try to make at least three observations during the day, and aim for as many as ten. This will greatly enhance your awareness of yourself, and give your child a wonderful sense of being cared for. Here is an example:

Monday, 8:30—Just woke up, angry, dreamt about arguing with Dad.

9:30—Driving to work, felt anxious, late again to a meeting.

12:00—Lunch with Cindy, felt happy, so nice to see her again

3:00—Talking with boss, felt excited, received a new assignment.

6:00—Finishing up paperwork, tired, long day.

8:00—Watching TV, bored, not having much fun.

If you find it difficult to identify your feelings, try copying the following list into your notebook. Then you can refer to it later, for example, at times you might get a vaguely negative feeling but aren't clear about what is going on. In that case, let your inner child help you pick a feeling from the list.

Angry	Sad	Frustrated
Anxious	Confused	Happy
Scared	Hurt	Excited
Stressed	Tired	Disappointed

You may also want to skip ahead to Chapter 10 to learn more about identifying and experiencing feelings.

Other Techniques

Creating New Images

Anything you can do to make your child more real to you will help.

Without trying to be an artist, one way is to create a picture of your child. Include the environment that your child chooses as a safe and comfortable

place, and depict the things that your child tells you are important. Simply listen to what your child cares about and what your child is trying to tell you about how to live. Then express these messages in a way that feels comfortable to you, whether that's two-dimensionally in a drawing, painting, or collage or three-dimensionally as a sculpture in clay or other media. Many find that it works better to use materials like oil or chalk pastels rather than careful line drawings.

Visual symbols can have a powerful impact—consciously and subconsciously. You can create and use new ones to reprogram the assumptions you have held for so long. The point here is to make ideas more concrete and visual so that you can better remember them and feel their impact. Your representations can be abstract—using colors, textures, and shapes to represent the feelings, values, and attitudes your child wants to convey. Pictures cut from magazines and other found objects can also be used. These literal expressions will serve to affirm your relationship with your child and make positive goals more real.

Finally, put your creations in places where you will see them, such as on the refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or by the front door, where they can serve as reminders and cues. For instance, I created a collage of photographs of nature and children combined with mirrors to remind me of my natural, innocent child blending with nature. I hung it by my front door so that as I left the house each day, I saw my own face among the other images. It gave me a repeated message to notice my child and feel encouraged about the nature of my essential being.

Using a Doll

I also recommend buying a doll to represent your inner child. This may seem corny or unnecessary; however, it can be a very powerful tool in helping you feel that your child is real. A doll can be seen and held. You can talk to a doll and use it to get yourself to communicate. In the privacy of your home, you can comfort and rock your child. In times of crisis, this can be very soothing. It's much easier than trying to hug yourself.

One client of mine, an executive in his forties, bought a doll that he took with him in his car. The doll sat in the passenger seat and gave him a strong daily reminder to stay in tune with his core feelings. The doll's physical presence was useful in helping him make sure he did not leave his child at home when he went to work.

This exercise can be great fun. Go to a toy store that has a wide selection of dolls and look them over. Notice the one that seems to be looking at you or the one that seems to be like you in some way. It does not have to look like you did as a child. It's more important to find one that feels like it represents your inner child now. Incidentally, when you buy the doll, no one will know it's for you! It would probably never occur to them. So you don't need to tell the checkout clerk it's for your niece, but if that will get you to do it, fine!

Writing Letters

As the adult, write a letter to your child. Share your feelings and your understanding of the situation, past and present; and explain your intentions for the future. Then as the child, write a letter in response. If you use your left hand (or right hand, if you are left-handed), it will feel more like a child trying to write. You can also print in block capitals, in pencil or marker.

The Adult as New Parent

To heal from old hurts, your inner child needs to know that your adult is the parent now. Being a good parent to yourself is important regardless of the kind of parenting you actually got as a child. Even if it was adequate, as an adult you have to take over the responsibility. If your family was dysfunctional, becoming your own parent is crucial.

When you were a child, you were unable to perceive your family dynamics accurately, and so you probably felt responsible for things you could not control. Whatever needs of yours were not being met, at home or school or church, it would be natural for you to think it was because you were wrong or bad in some way. This assumption is especially strong in a fundamentalist environment. In reality, you undoubtedly tried in the best

ways you knew how to get what you needed. You may have been very good and cooperative, or you may have been frequently ill or disruptive. Or perhaps you used some other strategy. When these didn't work, you probably concluded that you failed.

The likely result is that even now a part of you still lives in that household, holding on and trying to figure out how to get your needs met. You continue to stay there, trying to be good enough but not knowing any alternative. Essentially, part of your psyche is still stuck in the past, trying to fix the unfixable. Although there is nothing you can do now to change the circumstances of your childhood, you can't seem to let it go, because, the child inside you can still feel as trapped as you once literally were. Parents are essential for survival; a small child cannot just go out searching for a new home. Hence, finding a way to please parents and get needs met can seem like a life and death matter to a real child. So now your inner child, unaware as yet of the “re-parenting” you have to offer, hangs on to old stuff.

But now you do have a choice; you no longer have to live in that house or go to a harmful church. You don't have to take religious indoctrination, neglect, or abuse. You can abandon the impossible task of changing what has already happened or making people love you in ways they could not. With newfound energy, you can discover the powerful ability you have to respond to the needs you have *now*. The first step is to convince your child that you *will* be available, and will provide a new home. You need to rescue your child from a dysfunctional environment and bring the child to a safe and nurturing place.

Exercise 8.2: Adoption Visualization

For real life adoptive parents who want to help a needy child, it is important to understand the background of the child they are adopting. Likewise you can think of yourself as an adoptive parent of your inner child. In doing this, you can deepen your compassion for your child through visualization, by going to your child's prior home and letting your child show you what it was like. You may also want to visit church, school, and homes of other

family and friends. It will help build trust between you as you acknowledge the experience and provide a way out.

Record the following visualization, using the male or female pro-noun as appropriate. Then, eyes closed, listen to it, pausing as needed.

Take a few minutes to relax and settle into an inner state of awareness ... getting comfortable ... letting your eyes gently close ... letting go of other concerns ... taking this time for yourself ... acknowledging the caring that you have for yourself and your healing ... feeling good about the self-love that is developing in your life ... breathing deeply ... letting go ... sinking down ... inhaling relaxation ... exhaling tension ... breathing in ... and out ... in ... and out ... going deeper inside yourself ... where you can have an expanded awareness ... and be open to learning ... receiving from your own inner wisdom ... more healing ... and more connection with your inner child.

And when you are relaxed, you can find a personal place to be ... a place that is comfortable for your inner child ... and let yourself go there in your mind ... open and receiving ... meeting your child there ... Take a few minutes to be together ... talking or holding ... expressing feelings ... allowing the trust between you to be there.

(pause)

Then as your child feels safe, you can let him/her then know that you would like to understand him/her more deeply ... Invite him/her to take you by the hand and lead you back to the past where he/she can show you the sources of his/her pain. Let your child know that it is perfectly safe, that going back to take a look will not mean reliving the pain; observing it will not make it worse. With you along and holding hands, your child can feel secure and understand that you have a definite purpose in going back—to understand and to take him/her away from there.

Allow your child to create a scene that represents the pain he/she experienced. It may be at home with family members present, at school, or at church. Let the action flow while you watch like an observing spirit in the room. Listen to the words that are said, and notice the things that are done and not done. Observe your child and note the effect this environment has on him/her.

Allow the scene to continue long enough to get the information that you want about your child's experience. It may be important to let your child show you more scenes. You can observe as much as he/she wants to show you. For example, he/she may want you to see the way the father treated him/her, and then the way the mother behaved.

Your child may also want to express feelings. You can encourage your child to say and do things that were not safe then but are perfectly safe now, such as expressing rage. You can also act as his/her advocate. Speak up and address people in the scene. State what you see happening and how you feel about it.

Finally, when you feel finished and your child has had enough, let him/her know how much you understand, that you can feel the pain of what he/she has been through. You then need to tell your child that it is time to go. Gently assure him/her that this situation is finished and that you will both be going to a safe place, where his/her needs will be met. If your child is reluctant to leave and wants to continue trying to resolve old issues, you can empathize with his/her feelings and share his/her grief, while still being firm about the need to move on. Let your child know that he/she has already tried everything and that there is no more time. The past is past; there is no change possible there.

Then reassure your child that there is plenty of hope and possibility in the present—with you. Let him/her know what your home will be like to live in, how it will be different. Then take

your child with you to your present home and make a place for him/her. Give your child what he/she needs to be comfortable. Imagine actually adopting a child, doing all the things necessary to help a child move into your house and into your life.

Meeting Your Child's Basic Needs

Now that you have retrieved your child from the past, you need to take over the job of caring for him or her. You can celebrate this new responsibility in your life because now you have the power to make it a success. Instead of reacting unconsciously to situations that trigger bad memories, you can pay close attention to the feelings and needs of your child. In this way, you can resolve problems when they arise and begin to grow past them.

As a foundation for care, it helps to think about the basics of what children need, which is, of course, a description of what all people need! To broaden your understanding, for example, you can read books on human development and child psychology, or just spend time with kids. As an exercise, you could stop reading now and begin to compile a list of what you think describes the basic needs of children. Then compare what you wrote with the following:

- Physical safety and security
- Emotional safety and security
- Physical health—exercise, rest, nutrition
- Love and affection
- Guidance—behavioral and emotional
- Fun and play
- Information and education
- Creative self-expression

These are qualities and conditions that parents can provide or arrange for children in ways that are appropriate to their development.

As you parent your inner child, you may find that your needs are still fairly primitive in some areas, especially if you did not get what you needed at a young age. For example, if you did not have emotional safety, you may now need to learn to cry without shame. If life was too serious too early, you may now need to learn to schedule time for fun. This doesn't mean you have to re-create childhood, by getting a coloring book, for example. But you can! Adult kinds of fun are good too.

Exercise 8.3: Affirmations

Many of children's basic needs are not met (or denied) by the messages they receive from adults, particularly parents. To be emotionally strong and healthy, children need affirmation about who they are and what they can do. These affirmations can be verbal, nonverbal, or implied and be equally strong. Affirmations can build on each other and change in emphasis as a child develops. In a healthy child, these become internalized, so that the child grows up learning to make these same positive assumptions automatically.

If there have been gaps in your development, times when you did not receive important affirmations, your inner child needs to hear them now. Over time, your child will come to believe that the statements are true. The following affirmations are based on developmental theory and are adapted from Pamela Levin's book, *Becoming the Way We Are* (1985), and from J. I. Clarke's book, *Self-Esteem: A Family Affair* (1978). Draw from this list to determine the areas in which your child needs extra support. As you read, imagine these things are being said to you and notice your reactions. Does the affirmation sound unfamiliar or even odd? Does it feel good to hear it? You might feel a sense of relief or perhaps sadness that you haven't heard it said before.

Mark those affirmations that trigger a strong response with a plus sign (+). This way you can keep track of the things your child particularly needs to hear from you. Then, after you have read through all the affirmations, read

the list again and mark with a check mark any additional affirmations you want to reinforce.

Affirmations from Adult to Child

Being (birth to 6 months)

I'm glad you are alive.

I love you and I care for you willingly.

What you need is important to me.

I'm glad you are you.

You can grow at your own pace.

You can feel all of your feelings.

You belong here.

Doing (6 to 18 months)

I love you when you are active and when you are quiet.

You can do things as many times as you need to.

You can use all of your senses when you explore.

You can explore and experiment, and I will support and protect you.

You can be interested in everything.

You can know what you know.

I like to watch you initiate and grow and learn.

Thinking (18 months to 3 years)

You can become separate from me, and I will continue to love you.

It's okay for you to be angry; I won't let you hurt yourself or others.

I'm glad you are starting to think for yourself.

You can think and feel at the same time.

You can know what you need and ask for help.

You can say no and push and test limits as much as you need to.

You can learn to think for yourself, and I will think for myself.

Identity and Power (3 to 6 years)

All of your feelings are okay with me.

You can learn what is pretend and what is real.

You can explore who you are and find out who other people are.

You can try out different roles and ways of being powerful.

You can be powerful and ask for help at the same time.

You can find out the results of your behavior.

I love who you are.

Structure (6 to 12 years)

You can think before you say yes or no and learn from your mistakes.

You can trust your intuition to help you decide what to do.

You can find a way of doing things that works for you.

You can learn the rules that help you live with others.

You can learn when and how to disagree.

You can think for yourself and get help instead of staying in distress.

I love you even when we differ; I love growing with you.

Identity, Sexuality, Separation (12 to 19 years)

You can know who you are and learn and practice skills for independence.

You can learn the difference between sex and nurturing and be responsible for your needs and behavior.

You can develop your own interests, relationships, and causes.

You can learn to use old skills in new ways.

You can grow in your maleness/femaleness and still be dependent at times.

I look forward to knowing you as an adult.

My love is always with you. I trust you to ask for my support.

Interdependence (adult)

Your needs are important.

You can build and examine your commitments to your values and causes, your roles and your tasks.

You can finish each part of your journey and look forward to the next.

Your love matures and expands.

You can say your hellos and goodbyes to people, roles, dreams, and decisions.

You can be dependent and interdependent.

You can be responsible for your contributions to each of your commitments.

Through the years you can expand your commitments to your own growth, to your family, your friends, your community, and to all mankind.

You can be uniquely yourself and honor the uniqueness of others.

You can be creative, competent, productive, and joyful.

You can trust your inner wisdom.

You are lovable at every age.

You can begin convincing your child of these affirmations by focusing on just a few at a time, perhaps addressing the stages of development one by one. For example, you could concentrate on “being” affirmations for a week, then go on to “doing,” and so on. Eventually you would want to review all the new messages you are teaching your child and repeat those you have more difficulty remembering.

The ages indicated in the list represent developmental stages of confidence in who you are and what you can do. As you re-parent your child, as you say these affirmations to your child, you may find it helpful to visualize him or her at these ages.

Affirmations can be used in talking to your child whenever you have contact. One strategy is to begin your day by reading a few affirmations to your child. Then write them on cards and post them around the house or tuck them into your purse or pocket to refer to as needed during the day.

Note that this work is designed to be done in conjunction with disarming your “idea monster,” which is the subject of Chapter 9. Without this other component the affirmations may sound hollow, and your idea monster could thus undermine them simply by saying “Yeah, sure.”

In the same way that you would want to be sensitive every day to a real child in your home, you need to care about your inner child's feelings. If you have already begun a notebook to learn about feelings, you may be developing an awareness of your child's emotional patterns. That is, you may now know of certain situations that provoke anxiety, which times of the day are most difficult to get through, or which particular things bring joy.

In the next chapters, you will continue the work you have begun here on recognizing your child's needs and feelings and on changing the negative assumptions in your life to positive ones that allow you to grow.

Chapter 9

The Idea Monster

Unfortunately, a wise voice of guidance is not the only inner voice people hear. This other influence is not intrinsic; instead it is composed of the fears you have developed and negative messages you have heard over the course of your life. The monster of these ideas takes on a life of its own, popping into consciousness, criticizing and harassing you. Many of the messages are personal criticisms, such as, “You're so weak, you can't succeed without God's help,” “You don't matter to anybody,” and “You're stupid.” Other negative thoughts can be about other people, life, the world, and the future. They also tend to be over-generalized and extreme, for example: “Life has no meaning anymore without God,” “There's no such thing as real love; people are too selfish,” and “The world is dangerous.”

Research has shown that this kind of negative thinking can have a devastating effect on mental health. A variety of terms have been used to describe it, such as “irrational beliefs,” “automatic thoughts,” “dysfunctional thinking,” and labels like “the judge” and “the critic.” The term I like to use for this negative voice is “idea monster,” because it implies a dangerous creature that is not you and that must be rejected. The term also conjures up a concrete image, which is helpful because your unconscious mind understands symbols.

Fighting the Monster

It is important to understand this negative voice as an *outside* influence. The thoughts are being generated in your mind, but you did not independently generate these ideas. Instead messages you received—spoken or implied—gave rise to these ideas. Your father may have criticized you frequently and called you stupid, or your mother may have been overprotective and given you the idea that trying new things is dangerous. A Sunday school teacher may have convinced you that you were inherently evil.

Over time and with repetition, these messages become internalized so that they seem to be your own original thoughts. They *feel* true. They can cause you to focus just on negative evidence; you can even set up self-fulfilling prophecies of failure.

The severity of this negative thinking varies with different people. For some the voice is an occasional nag that may push for more achievement or criticize an imperfect spouse. For others it can be a bully, constantly beating them up over the smallest mistakes, harping on “should,” and spoiling the simple pleasures in life. Even more seriously, the voice can be vicious and dangerous, criticizing someone to their very core, leaving them hopeless about life, depressed, and debilitated. This kind of idea monster talk can be very ugly and frightening.

But no matter how ugly these messages, they are *only ideas*. Whether your idea monster seems like an omnipresent guilt, harassing and scaring you whenever you do anything counter to your religious training, or “the Holy Spirit, convicting of sin”; or, even Satan hounding you, it is critical to understand that these repetitive thoughts are only ideas, powerful but changeable. With awareness, your adult is capable of responding effectively.

As you may have noticed, the idea monster talk is typically unreasonable and twisted. To your adult, the statement “You never do anything right” is obviously an exaggeration and needn't be taken seriously. When you are feeling strong and centered, idea monster talk has limited impact, if any. When you are able to take care of yourself, that is, take care of your inner child, you won't become overwhelmed by negative thoughts. It is your child that is vulnerable to the idea monster's attacks. Your child is trusting and open, without the ability to make wise judgments. Therefore it is the adult's job to protect your child from the idea monster.

The Function of Idea Monster Talk

In a strange way, your idea monster has been a pseudo-friend. For instance, if you tell yourself that you are inadequate, you can withdraw from risky

situations. If you are bombarded with dire warnings and threats about the world, you learn to live very cautiously. Hounded by “should” and criticized for mistakes, you learn to restrict your behavior. Like following the “do's and don'ts” of a religious system, listening to idea monster talk can seemingly protect you from danger.

Unfortunately, the cost of using your idea monster for protection is high. You ultimately live permanently in a state of fear and self-condemnation. Your motivation becomes negative. Instead of doing something because you want to, you do it because you think you should or because you fear the consequences.

The alternative to this is to “fire” your idea monster and have your adult take over the job, which is important since some self-protection and self-control are necessary. However, your adult can find out how your idea monster has been fulfilling this function and take over in a more loving, healthy, and life-enhancing way. You can learn to become aware of idea monster talk and when you hear it to step in and rescue your child, chase out the idea monster, and clarify reality with truthful statements. Over time, your idea monster will diminish in size and threat as your child comes to trust you and feel safe in the world.

Exercise 9.1: Tracking Your Idea Monster

Your best weapon against your idea monster is awareness. If you make a simple little mistake and your idea monster says “That was really stupid. What's the matter with you?” you will be better equipped to evaluate and handle the attack if you can hear it. Unfortunately, most idea monster talk is so habitual that it occurs without any consciousness on your part. All you notice is that you feel bad

For this exercise, you can use the same small notebook you used for the “Staying in Touch” exercise in Chapter 8. This exercise is similar to that one. Each time you notice any idea monster talk, jot down the day and time, the situation, and the talk itself. Your clue to such talk may only be a negative feeling—you become discouraged, scared, or angry—or have low

energy, a headache, or a stomachache. At those times, your task is to simply listen to what is going on in your head. Try to hear what your idea monster is saying to you. If you don't hear any actual words, think about the feeling you have and guess at what your idea monster talk would sound like if it were in words. This has the powerful effect of bringing such talk out in the open and shining a light of awareness on it.

Carry your notebook around for a week and collect the monster talk. Then look over your notes. Chances are your idea monster has favorite ways of attacking you. There will likely be statements that indicate themes and certain kinds of situations in which you feel most vulnerable. Write down these major themes and these “door-opener” situations. Notice how your monster was “helping” you.

Jane is a woman of forty who lived in a religious commune for many years. As she went through the process of breaking away, her monster attacked and harassed her severely. She recorded the following monster talk:

Wednesday, 8:00 a.m., getting dressed for job interview: “You can’t make it out there in the world. It’s a hard, evil place, and you don’t have what it takes.”

Wednesday, 12:15 p.m., looking at house-share ads: “The commune is where you are safe and people care about you. You’re stupid to leave.”

Thursday, 8:00 p.m., thinking about what I want to do: “You’ve become selfish, and that’s evil. You’ll be punished.”

Friday, 10:00 a.m., called about job, no decision yet: “You don’t have any job skills. No one will hire you at your age.”

Saturday, 2:00 p.m., looked at room, talked to potential housemates: “You tried to leave once before and fell on your face. Don’t you remember that? You vowed not to ever do that again.”

Sunday, 9:00 p.m., after talking to Robert about leaving: “You’re just not spiritual enough; that’s your real problem.”

Monday, 7:00 a.m., writing about what it will be like not living here anymore: “If you leave the body, you will die.”

Monday, 3:00 p.m., talked to counselor about job training: “Life’s too confusing. It’s too hard and not worth living.”

This is what Jane wrote about the patterns she noticed:

My inner child feels very scared, weak and ashamed. Idea monster talk themes have to do with 1) being bad, 2) being inadequate, and 3) the world as an impossibly evil and dangerous place. The door-openers are when I talk about leaving the group, make any plans, or make any contacts for jobs or living arrangements. My idea monster seems to protect me by scaring me into staying put and conforming to what I know.

Once you, like Jane, see your patterns, you can learn to replace your idea monster and truly care for your child.

Use this space to write a list of lines you have identified from your idea monster. Be sure to start each one with “you” so you can distance yourself from these ideas. These are lines from your monster directed to your inner child.

You. . . .

You. . . .

You. . . .

You. . . .

What do you notice about any patterns? Are there any “door-openers” or situations in which your child is especially vulnerable?

Exercise 9.2: Rebuttals for the Idea Monster Talk

Once you have identified the kinds of things your idea monster says, the next step is to begin to replace that talk with another kind. As a first step, your adult can intervene and stop the negative thinking. This begins to protect your child in a very important way. However, simply rejecting the automatic negative thoughts leaves a void. So, to truly negate each idea monster statement you need to examine it and replace it with a positive and truthful one. In this way, you take responsibility for the messages communicated to your child. This is a creative, loving, and essential project for your adult.

To begin, take the list you made in the preceding exercise and copy it onto the left side of a large sheet (or sheets) of paper. Then on the right, make a companion list of rebuttals. (See the example of how Jane completed her exercise.) Bear in mind that your new statements are meant for your child to hear, not for your idea monster. Your idea monster is not reasonable and

you should not argue with it. Your generic response to your idea monster can be as simple as “No!” “Shut up!” “Back off!” or “Get out of here!” An overt rejection is often helpful.

Some of your rebuttals may not be easy. Your idea monster has for a long time had the job of defining reality. Now your adult is taking over, and it requires effort to provide the clear thinking and support that will be most helpful to your child.

If you discover new idea monster statements, write them down and design rebuttals for them as well. People often find that as the adult learns to handle certain issues, the idea monster attacks in other areas. Bear in mind that it takes a while to identify all this negative thinking and replace it completely.

Guidelines for Rebuttal

- Rebuttals must be stated positively. If your idea monster says, “You're weak,” you need to respond with something like “I'm strong in many ways,” rather than “I'm not weak.”
- Rebuttals must be reasonable and believable . If your idea monster says “Life sucks,” you can say “Life has both ups and downs. The down times can be tolerated and I can also enjoy many beautiful moments.” If you try to reply with a positive global statement such as “Life is wonderful,” it may prove too hard to accept and consequently be of little use. The notion of learning is a powerful antidote to expectations of perfection. For example, in response to “You're no good at meeting people,” you can say “I'm learning new social skills.”
- Rebuttals must be accurate to your rational mind, although not necessarily to your gut. You don't have to believe your rebuttals emotionally just yet. It's enough to state the truth as your adult sees it and then gradually come to feel it as something your child can really believe. For example, if your idea monster has convinced you that your body is ugly, it may take a while to believe the rebuttal “My body is very special to me and beautiful in its own way.” Though

they start in your head, in time new ideas make their way down to gut level. With some, you'll need to be content for now with a cognitive version. Repeating it often so your child will establish acceptance.

- Rebuttals must be accompanied by specific examples. Examples add power to your statement. If your idea monster says, "You've become selfish and uncaring now that you say no to people," you can say "Actually, because I take better care of myself, I am able to be more loving. I do things now out of pleasure instead of guilt. For example, because I did not agree to work overtime the other day, I had the energy and inspiration to write a supportive letter to my friend."

The words that you use in your everyday language are also important. When people say, "I beat myself up" or "I am my own worst enemy," they are talking about their idea monsters. This choice of words is powerful in its implication that you would hurt yourself. Yet you know that you would not do so consciously. At core, you want to survive and with some healthy self-love, you want to thrive. So be careful what you say. If you are struggling, and you reword it as, "My idea monster is beating up on me" (or more accurately "beating up on my child"), you can more easily mobilize the energy of your adult to intervene. You will feel a natural concern for your child and rise to the occasion. Responding like a provoked mama bear can at times be highly appropriate.

Jane wrote the following rebuttals for the idea monster talk she collected:

Idea Monster Voice

You can't make it out there in the world. It's a hard, evil place, and you don't have what it takes.

The commune is where you are safe and people care about you. You're stupid to leave.

Adult Voice

I have strong inner resources that I am learning to use. The world can be hard at times but I enjoy solving problems. The world is also a wonderful opportunity to grow.

Other places are also safe, and I can make new friends. I have intelligent reasons for leaving.

You've become selfish and that's evil. You'll be punished.

You don't have any job skills. No one will hire you at your age.

You tried to leave once before and fell on your face. Don't you remember that? You vowed not to ever do that again.

You're just not spiritual enough, that's your real problem.

If you leave the "body," you will die.

Life's too confusing. It's too hard and not worth living.

Taking care of myself is a loving, responsible thing to do.

I have important skills that need to be presented as well as possible. I'm getting help from a counselor in writing my resume. Many people return to work at my age.

That was a long time ago and I have learned a lot since then. Specifically, I now know about my inner child and how I can take care of her.

I'm learning to define my own spirituality. The other day, it felt wonderful to go for a hike and notice how spiritual I felt out in nature.

That's nonsense. Religious groups typically use such a threat as a method of mind control. There are millions of people that are not in the so-called body that are doing just fine. In fact, I know several people who have left this group and are very happy.

Life is challenging. I'm learning new skills for handling difficulties and also finding new meaning. It will take time for me to form new patterns for myself, and it is certainly worth living.

In the long run, the list of rebuttals you create will be a set of weapons you can use against an idea monster “attack.” When a problem arises, you can draw from the adult statements that you have already worked out. Eventually, you will have a ready set of affirmations that will define reality in a positive way.

Write some of your adult rebuttals here:

Idea Monster Voice

Adult Voice

Crisis Intervention

There will likely be times when, despite all the preventative work you've done to love and strengthen yourself, your idea monster still creates real problems for your child. In those situations, your adult needs to step in and provide emergency care.

As an analogy, imagine you are a real parent and you have taken your young child to the park to play. Your child is running around while you read. You look up from your book, and see that your child is sitting on a park bench with a very dangerous-looking character talking to her. He is telling her that she is ugly, stupid, worthless, and that no one loves her. As she listens to him, she believes it and cries. She has no way of judging the truth of what he is saying. What's your impulse? How do you react?

Most likely, you'd feel very angry. You would want to get rid of the creep and rescue your child. Then you'd comfort her, understand her feelings, and reassure her about the truth—that she is wonderful and loved.

This is exactly what you need to do when your idea monster attacks your inner child.

For example, suppose that you are learning how to protect your time. You work, you have family and friends, and you need the little time you get on the weekend for yourself—just to keep sane and healthy. Despite the training you have had to be selfless, you have decided that it is okay to be good to yourself and say no more often to outside requests. Your friend has just asked you to help him move, and assertively yet kindly you have said no. Then your idea monster starts in, saying, “That was incredibly selfish of you! Great! Just dump all your Christian values now. How does it feel to be so concerned about yourself and no one else? Looking out for number one, eh? Just wait until you need help. You can't keep friends this way. Soon, everyone will know what you're really like!”

This is a full-blown idea monster attack. Your idea monster is harping on one of your greatest fears—that of being a selfish and therefore a bad person. Soon you feel miserable.

Your adult needs to intervene at this point. The adult intervention includes four steps, each beginning with “A” to help you remember them:

1. Awareness
2. Acceptance
3. Affirmation
4. Action

The Freeze-Frame Process

The whole intervention procedure requires you to take some time out. Otherwise you will automatically feel and do what you have always felt and done. A time-out enables you to stop the action so that you can see the situation more clearly and do something about it. I like to call it a “freeze-frame.” The process brings your thinking to a conscious level, where you can make some choices instead of being victimized by a habitual response.

Step 1: Awareness

First take note of two things: How your child is reacting and feeling and what your idea monster is saying.

In our example, your child is probably feeling anxious and ashamed. Your idea monster is being critical of your child's supposed selfishness.

Step 2: Acceptance

Next communicate that you accept your child's feelings. Do not add to the problem by condemning this reaction with words like "Oh, that's stupid; don't be silly" or "There you go again, overreacting." Instead you let your child know that those feelings are understandable given the idea monster talk that has been going on, that you understand the reasons for the sensitivity, and you do not blame your child for struggling at this time. (This is a critical step that many people frequently skip.)

In our example, you would tell your child "It's okay, I understand why you feel scared and ashamed. Those are pretty scary, awful things the idea monster is saying. They remind you of a lot of old stuff that's hard to let go of right away. It makes sense that you have these feelings. It's all right."

Step 3: Affirmation

In this step, you use the rebuttals you designed above and affirmations like those listed in Chapter 8. Without active involvement on the part of your adult, the idea monster will define reality for your child in such a situation. The idea monster talk feels like truth to your child and thus needs to be corrected. So you get in there and help your child. You reject the idea monster statements and give your child a better, more accurate reality. You replace the idea monster talk with positive affirmations, and you clarify your intentions to protect your child and learn what you need to know.

In our example, you would assure your child that protecting her time is not selfishness. You can point out that your child does a lot of loving, giving things, including things for the friend who is moving. You remind your child she is doing well learning self-care and that happy, healthy people make even better, more generous friends. Furthermore, no one is

condemning her for that decision. The friend understood, as people usually are. (In fact, they often will respect you for being honest and knowing how to take care of yourself.) The only real criticism is coming from the idea monster, and that can be rejected. You reassure your child that she is a good person; having needs is part of being human. You tell your child that you will continue to help reject the idea monster's talk and improve self-care.

Step 4: Action

As you finish processing the situation, you make a judgment about whether action is called for and if so, what. It may be that comforting your child and providing reassurance about the truth is enough, that further action is not necessary or worth the trouble. In that case, you help your child let the matter go.

On the other hand, it may be that you need to actively do something. For instance, if someone has done something hurtful, you may need to address it with that person—assertive communication is the job of the adult. If your child needs something important, you need to find a way to take care of it. For example, if your child is lonely, you can think of ways to make new friends. As the adult, you are the advocate, the champion of the child.

In our example, reassurance and truth telling would probably be enough. However, let's say that the friend was offended because you did not agree to help him move, and this friend has reacted this way other times when you were taking care of yourself. In this case, you might decide to take action by talking to your friend about your feelings. You could say “I need to talk to you about some of the interactions we've been having. I value our friendship and I think maybe we've been misunderstanding each other. I'm also interested in your feelings and would like to hear your side. Would you be willing to talk with me?” When the friend has agreed, you could go on to explain your feelings like this:

I'd like you to know that I have been working very hard to take better care of myself. It seems that I often get worn out and can barely function when I spread myself too thin. On top of work

and family responsibilities, I can't seem to say no to anything—PTA meetings, social engagements, neighborhood projects, you name it. I'm afraid of being selfish. I tend to think of self-care as a bad thing because my religion taught me to always think of others first. Unfortunately, then I end up miserable. So this is very hard for me, but I absolutely have to learn to take better care of myself. I would like you to be more understanding if you can. When you get offended, it feels harsh to me, and I get scared that I might lose you as a friend. You are important to me and I'd like your support in the growing I am trying to do.

Bear in mind that when you take action that involves cooperation from someone else, it is important to be very careful with your expectations. The other person may disagree totally and deny your request. You cannot do anything about this. You simply do the best you can with the integrity of your own communication and let that person be responsible for his or her reaction. If you are successful, you can enjoy the outcome. If your effort is thwarted, you accept the situation and retain the satisfaction that you had the courage to try to resolve the problem. In either case, the important thing is that you were a strong advocate for your child.

Each time you do this, the trust between you and your child grows. Your child feels more valuable by seeing your efforts; feeling more cherished each time you go to bat for him or her. Over time, your skill also grows and taking action becomes easier. It becomes fun and empowering to get what you need from the world!

Self-Soothing

The most basic and necessary skill in caring for your child is that of comforting yourself when necessary—knowing how to give yourself some TLC (tender loving care). In the way a child looks to a parent for simple unconditional love when he or she has been hurt, your inner child looks to you. You are always present, and you are the one who cares. You know yourself best, so you can respond best to your own emotional needs.

Some people find it helpful in a crisis to hold on to the stuffed animal or doll that represents their inner child. One woman I worked with discovered that it was enormously comforting to cuddle her doll in a rocking chair. You can comfort yourself in any number of ways. Just imagine what you would do with a real child who is very upset. Listening with openness to feelings is very important. Comforting words are often very helpful, such as:

I hear you ... Let me hold you ... It's okay to cry ... I know, I know
...Feel my arms ... I'll take care of you ... I'm doing my best ...
Sweet thing ... Relax in my arms ... I'm holding you close ... I
love you ... You're safe ... I'm here ... Breathe.

You can imagine holding the child, listening to music, or singing. You could write together or do art.

You might also find diversions to be a comfort, such as taking a walk, dancing, going out to a nice meal, or taking in a movie. It might be nice to crawl in bed with a good book, take a bath, or get a massage. You could get some exercise, go camping, or be with a very caring friend.

Just be sure to give your child repeated loving messages; this is not a time to avoid feelings. Rather, you are *accepting* your child's feelings and demonstrating that you have the love and strength to handle them. You are present to help process even the most painful feelings. Therefore self-soothing does not mean self-medication with drugs and alcohol. Nor does it mean addictive behaviors that have destructive long-term consequences, such as binge eating, excessive shopping, or gambling. Part of your self-care is to choose healthy ways to self-soothe. When you know you can do that, even the worst crisis can be handled.

Writing can be a method not only of getting to know your inner child but of self-care as well. Here a woman is writing to her inner child the morning after a painful family crisis. She is coming to realize that it is her job to give herself the love she needs.

Dear Sandy,

I love you, even if no one else does. Last night's scene was awful; I can understand why you are in pain, why you feel hurt and unloved. I know about the abuse even if no one else will admit it. I know it, and I feel for you, and I always will. And we don't ever have to pretend—we won't pretend. As far as I'm concerned, you're a beautiful, wonderful creature, and I will always do whatever I can to take care of you. And what I want, what I really, really want, is to continue learning to love you better. You deserve it. You know that I've tried to make up for all the hurts in your life. I've tried to protect you, and I've tried to love you in a way that would make you feel the way a child should feel—easily lovable and confident and able to take that for granted. To feel safe—that's what I want for you.

Getting Outside Help

Despite your best efforts, there may be times when your idea monster becomes a very dangerous beast indeed. Fearful thoughts can degenerate into extreme and hopeless states of mind. Your monster can sabotage your attempts to cope with life and permanently damage your relationships. Old beliefs about your worthlessness or despair that life in the world is horrible can escalate until you become desperate or perhaps even suicidal.

At such a time of crisis, you should consider getting help from a therapist. A good professional can help you sort out the emotions that are erupting from old conditioning. You also need to be honest about your situation and solicit support from trusted family and friends. There is no point in risking your life. If it is allowed to become extreme, your idea monster can kill you.

The following journal excerpt is from a man who suffered at the hands of his idea monster (though he did not know he had a monster and blamed himself). Growing up fundamentalist and then working as a minister, Daryl had always taken care of others and neglected himself. Romantic relationships always came apart because he needed so much and then hated himself for it. Daryl's self-loathing had reached life-threatening proportions when he sought help. He wrote in his journal:

If I could just do it right, I would win that final approval. I never did and I never will—it will never be right! Life will never be right enough, good enough, satisfying. Profound futility. I can't make it all be okay, and if I don't, it won't be okay. For God's sake, I have to make everything be okay and I can't. It will never be okay. And that pisses me off! I never get what I want, what I need. It's never enough. I never learned to take care of myself, and I wasn't worth the trouble anyway.

Eventually, Daryl was able to identify and tame his idea monster in the course of therapy. He learned that he had to “get on his own side.” That is, by joining his adult with his child in loyal self-protection, he was able to master his monster. You too, may have a time when you need the support of a trained professional to help you realize that you can master your fears, that they are “only” ideas and you can reveal them with the light of awareness.

Chapter 10

Reclaiming Feelings

I stuffed all my anger. I stuffed everything that was negative, because nice little girls don't get angry and they don't hurt anybody's feelings. I've always been one of these people that went around smiling and trying to be the perfect Christian, perfect daughter, perfect wife, perfect mother, and everything.

So you just keep everything inside of you. You keep stuffing it down, down, down. So when I had my midlife crisis, then everything fell apart.

— Pat

Human feelings—wellspring to the poet, an irrelevance to the physical scientist, a puzzle to the therapist, energy to the artist, an annoyance to some, mystery to many. The attitude of religion toward feelings is usually one of great caution. If humans are basically evil, then their feelings are evil and thus not to be encouraged. At best, they are an inaccurate guide, at worst, they can lead to sin. Fundamentalists are taught to distrust the evidence of their senses and to beware of believing emotions.

If one believes instead that humans are basically good and have inner resources that can be trusted, then feelings are perceived very differently. Through feelings we experience life, its joys and sorrows, to greater heights and depths. Without feeling, we are dead. If you believe that the life here and now is worthwhile, then you may want to feel life to its fullest. To do this, you need to become aware of and accept your feelings.

Many people fear the idea of emotions getting out of control and causing damage. However, as you come to understand and accept yourself more, you will naturally learn to use your feelings appropriately. The approach here involves *processing* feelings rather than *controlling* them. In the

vocabulary we have been using, your adult listens to your child and then uses those feelings for effective decision-making and action.

Part of the concern about emotions getting “out of control” is a fear of being overwhelmed by negative feelings, for example, grief or anger. So it's useful to keep in mind these points:

- As you become more in touch with yourself, you will feel more, but what is wrong with that? Pain and frustration are bearable and they don't last forever. Your adult needs to learn this and reassure the child—and not let the idea monster say that it's too much, it's intolerable, and it will never end.
- The alternative to feeling grief and anger is deadness, because in suppressing them you also suppress the joy and excitement in your life. Suppressing feelings can also produce physical problems such as headaches, ulcers, hypertension, and sleep disorders; relationship problems that reflect a lack of trust or intimacy, sexual disorders, and displaced anger; and mental problems such as difficulty concentrating, poor decision-making, and anxiety.
- You can learn ways of working with your “negative” emotions so that they are not debilitating. These skills are presented in this and other chapters.

Faith Versus Feeling

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. (Proverbs 16:32)

In fundamentalism, feelings often are perceived as evidence of the fallen nature of human beings. The general idea seems to be that strong emotion is what links humans to animals and separates them from God. The passions of rage and lust, or even hunger and thirst, are viewed as animalistic. Humans do like to “eat, drink, and be merry” and in the Bible, that spells doom!

This extends to “everyday” emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, and even happiness. Anger in this context indicates a “rebellious spirit.” To be sad

means you are ungrateful and self-pitying. Fear is evidence of a lack of trust in God because “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). (However, guilt was permitted since it would spur you to obedience.)

Positive emotions are viewed similarly. Self-confidence is considered dangerous. Likewise religious life has traditionally demanded that the faithful renounce earthly pleasures (read positive feelings) in favor of devotion to God.

Thus, the only real emotion allowed is a controlled, peaceful “love” of God. Expression should not be for the self, but as a channel for the divine. Thus the spontaneous emotion of the creative process in the arts is also suspect. Believers are expected to “rejoice always,” not matter what the circumstance.

Thinking about it now, you can probably see that this meant you had to twist your natural feelings to fit. Instead of getting help with processing normal feelings of hurt, for example, you were supposed to deny the emotion and feel good.

In secular culture, people learn to pay attention to their feelings as indicators of what is right and wrong for them. But notions such as “trust your gut,” “doing what feels right,” and “following an instinct” are not allowable in the fundamentalist context because they would mean looking to yourself instead of God. The notion of following the leading of the Holy Spirit is, of course, considered completely different. But how do you distinguish between the Spirit and your own intuitive urge? If you weren't sure of God's voice, you probably suppressed your feelings, even if they did seem to be on track with your faith.

The Bible does not offer any guidance for processing feelings. You may remember feeling frustrated and being told, “When God closes a door, and he opens a window.” The Christian Church has developed many such clichés. In being faithful, you learn to twist very normal emotions and reinterpret them beyond recognition. When harassed by nonbelievers, for

instance, you were told to “count it all joy.” The Apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh to keep his good feelings under control.

A related technique for controlling emotions is to be devout through prayer, Bible-reading, and fellowship. That is, to keep your mind focused in the approved direction, using methods discussed in Chapter 4 that produce a trance-like consciousness. For instance, repeated prayers, like other focused and repetitive material, can create a numb and peaceful emotional state: “Rejoice always, pray constantly...” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–17).

In short, your religious training has probably damaged your ability to feel free, open, and joyous; to express yourself, to identify and process feelings like anger, sadness, and fear is probably limited. But these are skills essential for human mental and emotional health. Healing in these areas will produce a remarkable change.

In the following excerpt from the poem, “My Easy God is Gone,” James Kavanaugh speaks eloquently of his recovery of feeling after leaving his faith:

The rising sun redeems me with the rolling
Waves warmed in its arms.
A dog barks and I weep to be alive, a cat studies
My joy and me is boundless.
I lie on the grass and boy-like, search the sky.
The clouds do not turn to angels, the winds
Do not whisper of heaven or hell.
Perhaps I have no God—what does it matter?
I have beauty and joy and transcending loneliness,
I have the beginning of love—as beautiful as it
Is feeble—as free as it is human.
I have the mountains that whisper secrets
Held before men could speak,
I have the ocean that belches life on
The beach and caresses it in the sand,

I have a friend who smiles when he sees
Me, who weeps when he hears my pain,
I have a future full of surprises, a
Present full of wonder.
I have no past—the steps have disappeared
The wind has blown them away.

I stand in the Heavens and on earth, I
Feel the breeze in my hair.
I can drink to the North Star and shout
On a bar stool,
I can feel the teeth of a hangover, the
Joy of laziness,
The flush of my own rudeness, the surge of
My own ineptitude.
And I can know my own gentleness as well,
My wonder, my nobility.
I sense the call of creation, I feel its
Swelling in my hands.
I can lust and love, eat and drink, sleep
And rise,
But my easy God is gone—and in his stead
The mystery of loneliness and love!

Exercise 10.1: Idea Monster Talk About Feelings

Read the following statements and see which ones sound familiar – like something your idea monster says. Check the ones that you recognize and want to change. Then, over the next few days, listen closely to your internal dialogue and pay special attention to times when you feel guilty or helpless. What is your monster saying to you? Try to put it into words and compare it to this list. Add more statements that may be missing here.

Also notice how this increased awareness can begin to disarm your idea monster about feelings. Your inner child deserves to feel!

- [] Calm down. You shouldn't get so excited
- [] You're bad for feeling angry.
- [] A good person feels good all the time.
- [] It's ungrateful and selfish to feel sad.
- [] Depression is just self-pity.
- [] If you were spiritual and close to God, you wouldn't feel bad.
- [] You're weak and wrong if you feel scared.
- [] Fear means you're not trusting God, so it's a sin.
- [] It's wrong to enjoy worldly pleasure.
- [] Your rage is from Satan.
- [] Let go, forgive and forget.
- [] Don't think about how you feel.
- [] What you feel isn't important.
- [] If you can't say something pleasant, don't say anything at all.
- [] Enjoying sex means you are dirty and bad.

It's Okay to Feel

You have a right to your feelings. They are not bad or wrong. They do not make you less worthy, less spiritual, weaker, or less rational. Nor are they “female” and therefore “inferior”! Feelings make you alive; they help you make good decisions; and they help you understand people.

Aliveness

Fully living your life means *feeling* your life each day. Enjoying yourself and simply experiencing what it means to be human requires access to your emotions. Living fully also means freely expressing yourself. We can observe small children as role models. They play, have feelings, and express themselves without self-consciousness or judgment.

It helps to recognize your inner child and get back that childlike innocence and honesty. Within the guidelines of safety that your “adult” provides, your “child” can express any and all feelings. There are communication skills that you can learn for expressing feelings effectively with other people and skills for processing emotions privately. Art, writing, and music are among many ways to creatively express feelings. With emotional development, you will be increasingly more aware of yourself and begin to grow. You are a naturally creative being, with honest feelings and urges that can be trusted!

Choices

Feelings are needed for decision-making. It's pretty hard even to choose from among thirty-one flavors of ice cream if you have no feelings. More seriously, you need your feelings as an internal gauge to decide among vocations, relationships, leisure activities, and other choices in your life. In the past, you may have relied on religious guidelines, church leaders, or “God’s will” to make your decisions for you. Now, to be more inner-directed, you need to develop your feeling ability so that you can “read” yourself.

But, as you may discover, using your feelings to guide your life is a fine art. As a gauge for decision-making, it is important to distinguish this process from judgment about right and wrong. Your feelings help you discern between things that are satisfying for you and those that aren't. For example, you might decide to travel for a year instead of going to college. That does not make college *wrong* for you—and it is certainly not wrong for someone else! Your feelings simply help you make a choice about

something that will work for you at the moment, given your awareness at a particular time.

Empathy

We live in social settings that require skill in getting along with others. This includes the ability to understand and empathize with what other people are experiencing (rather than judging them). Greater awareness and acceptance of your own feelings will help in this area as well. As you become comfortable and skilled with your own feelings, you will become better at understanding others'. Your relationships will improve, since listening and accepting are fundamental to communication.

Exercise 10.2: New Message to Your Child

To replace the idea monster talk about feelings, your child needs to hear new messages from your adult. One way to do this is to take the idea monsters that you identified in the preceding exercise and write a specific rebuttal for each one. Make two columns on a piece of paper as you did with monster statements in Chapter 9, monster talk on the left and rebuttals to the right. Or use index cards with rejected monster statements on one side and new, positive messages on the other. Keep these with you and review the new ideas whenever you can.

Another approach is to write an affirming paragraph to your child. Read it to yourself daily or whenever it's needed. The following paragraph is an example. Use it for ideas, and then write your own, more personal message. It will be more powerful that way.

Dear Child,

It's okay to feel whatever you feel. All of your feelings are fine with me. They are natural and useful. I will work at paying more attention to your feelings, and I will separate out the monster talk. I will accept your feelings and help you feel loved, no matter what you are feeling. I will provide you the support and the guidance you need to use feelings effectively as I learn more

about this process. Your feelings are not bad or dangerous. They are beautiful and wonderful. They make you alive and special. I hope you will relax and trust me more and more as together we learn to open up to our feelings.

Feelings Are Natural and Necessary

Understanding the purpose for feelings can help you accept and trust them more. They are not accidental. Feelings arise for a reason. You are a good, innocent being with feelings that occur because of your experiences. Research on basic emotions indicates that there is an evolutionary base to our emotional responses (Plutchik 1980). That is, our feelings have important survival value. They stimulate us to protect ourselves or take action that is for our own good. Just as they were useful millions of years ago, they can still be our friends and give us vital information.

Fear

When there is danger, fear can be a lifesaver. If you were to see a dangerous animal on the loose, your body would have a physiological response. You'd become alert and ready to respond to a real threat to your well being. Other situations that threaten you will cause the same *flight-or-fight* response. You need fear to survive; it is not bad or wrong.

However, people often feel fear when they overestimate a perceived threat—because they have been told or tell themselves a danger exists where in fact it does not. Likewise, some of our fears become outdated. For example, you might be fearful of being creative because as a child, an art teacher harshly criticized you. The key is to assess the real danger. When you have a fear reaction, your adult can look at the situation and decide whether the threat is real and what to do in response. Using the above example, many years later, your adult would be able to examine a new situation in an art class and reassure your inner child that it is safe now. On the other hand, a woman living with a dangerously abusive husband must realize that her fear is warranted. This fear then enables her to find safety.

Your child always needs your rational adult to make these kinds of judgments. Thus you should respect and appreciate your fears and anxieties as important signals. They can prompt you to stop and assess any danger, and then find safety if necessary. If no true danger exists, you can relax and let go of this vigilance. Rather than trying to get rid of all fear, as many people think they must do to be healthy, it is much more effective to learn good judgment in assessing perceived threat. (In the next chapter, specific suggestions and exercises for learning to assess and cope with fears are offered.)

Anger

Anger is another emotion that people try to get rid of. Yet it is also important—it means that something is wrong. Something has happened that crossed your values. Your brain is screaming, “Stop! No! This isn't right!” This surge of feeling carries with it the energy to do something about it.

Anger also has survival value. If I were to come home and see a babysitter slapping my child, I would be furious and would intervene immediately. The slap crosses my values and the anger causes me to make the necessary change in the situation. My “momma bear” instinct is a legitimate feeling tied to the survival of my family. Again, however, I need the adult part of me to make judgments. If I find that what I thought was a slap was actually a book falling to the floor, I can let go of my rage.

Anger calls for attention and a decision. It is not something to hang on to; it serves no purpose if you hold grudges, pout, or let it fester. The result of letting it eat at you is hurtful to you, and perhaps to others. In other words, you can either use the energy of the feeling to effect a change or drop it.

As another example, if you have a friend who is perpetually asking you to go to church, this might make you angry. You can note the feeling, realize that the value of your privacy is being violated, and decide what to do. If you decide it warrants action, you can assertively address the issue with this person. On the other hand, if you decide the issue is minor and not worth the hassle, you can choose to let it go. If you choose the latter, you need to

be able to truly release your anger, relax, and stop thinking about it. Your anger has served you by focusing your attention, but its usefulness is finished.

Anger is very useful when seen in this way. It is neither bad nor wrong, but merely and *importantly*, a signal about something gone awry. But again, the mature adult skill of assessment is vital, so that you can use anger appropriately. The person who is angry about everything and the person who is never angry are both confused. In these extreme cases, personal values need to be clarified. When value assessments are made, then handling anger amounts to having the component skills of either taking action or letting go. Later sections of this chapter offer assistance in learning these skills.

Sadness

Feelings of grief or sadness occur when there is a loss. These feelings are a natural reaction, producing lower energy levels. As an animal will withdraw to lick its wounds, sadness can be a signal for you to take care of yourself. If you feel hurt, the important message is to self-nurture. According to the research of psychologist Eric Klinger (1977), grief and depression can even be seen as having survival value, in that people withdraw their investment from pursuing previous goals, thus conserving energy. They are then better able to make new commitments.

Your adult can process the situation to distinguish real reasons to feel sad from idea monster talk (compare “My daughter doesn't want to visit me” to “Everybody hates me”), and then help your child.

Guilt

Guilt is a much-maligned feeling! Without guilt, we would have chaos; people could hurt each other without feeling bad about it. Healthy guilt is the negative feeling you have when you have crossed your own values. This information is enormously valuable. Like guardrails on the side of a highway, you can use guilt to get back on course.

Like other feelings, guilt should not be considered an end in itself, nor as punishment. Guilt is a signal to do something differently, and this is functional for survival. When mistakes are viewed this way, they become learning experiences. You feel bad, review what happened, make new decisions about what you would do in the future, and repair whatever damage you can.

“Neurotic guilt,” like that often fostered by religion, is a different matter. It tends to be excessive and inappropriate, based on the expectations of others instead of personal values or dwelling on the error rather than using the guilt feelings to make a change. In your religious experience, committing a sin made you a sinner, a bad deed made a bad person. This global condemnation creates low self-worth and more neurotic guilt and misery.

But if your adult can process the experience of violating your self-determined guidelines for behavior and pursue whatever corrective learning is in order, you can use the guilt to grow. We have a need to live in congruence with our values, and guilt helps us do that. And once the guilt has served its purpose, it can be released.

Joy

Feelings of joy seem obviously functional and good. However, some people are cautious about joy because they believe there may be too much disappointment when their feelings change. Better not to get too excited; then it won't be so hard to come back down. Some even learn to avoid the *possibility* of joy. A child might not ask for an ice cream cone to avoid the pain of a refusal.

The positive feelings we have when our needs or desires are met have survival value, helping to keep us alive. We have good feelings when we are physically safe, get enough to eat, feel warm, have sex, or share closeness with another person. Achieving a goal or doing something creative also produces joy.

Allowing yourself to feel joy means that you accept its fluctuation. Some people hold back from happiness because it's never quite enough or they fear missing it when the feeling is gone. Thus it takes some courage to be present and feel positive feelings as well.

A key to accepting and feeling joy in your life is to have faith that you can handle other more difficult feelings. Being truly involved with life always brings a mix of feelings; along with joy you get sadness, anger, and anxiety. Confidence with all of these lets you enjoy the times of happiness. For example, you can take great pleasure in an intimate relationship if you do not worry about the grief you will feel if the relationship ends, that you can trust yourself to take care of yourself if and when that time comes. Similarly, if you trust yourself to handle the anger of frustration, you can risk pursuing difficult goals. You can view obstacles as challenges.

Exercise 10.3: Practice Feelings

Actual practice in noticing and labeling your feelings can open you up to them. You may be quite surprised at the difference this can make in your daily experience of life.

This exercise builds on one in Chapter 8. Check in with yourself regularly, say every hour. (You can use a watch with a beeper to remind you.) Each time, jot down a word that best describes what you are experiencing in a small notebook that you carry with you. The emphasis here is on the intensity of and subtle distinctions between different emotions – their shades of gray or tints of color. Listed here is a broad vocabulary to help you pinpoint your feelings. Using more precise words can give you more power to label them and thus to fully experience them.

Joy: light, cheerful, happy, joyful, up, high, pleased, positive, delighted, thrilled, ecstatic, euphoric, overjoyed, exhilarated, enthralled, elated

Interest: stimulated, interested, curious, inquisitive, alert, aware, eager, animated, expectant, hopeful, excited, optimistic, spirited,

energized, lively

Satisfaction: contented, satisfied, fulfilled, gratified, satiated, complete, replete

Peace: calm, comfortable, peaceful, tranquil, soothed, mellow, relaxed, at peace, attuned, composed

Confusion: unsure, puzzled, torn, confused, uncertain, ambivalent, undecided, perplexed, disconcerted, conflicted, hesitant, disoriented, baffled, bewildered, lost, crazy

Surprise: amazed, surprised, shocked, appalled, blown away, shattered

Stress: hassled, burdened, fragmented, stressed, torn apart, on edge, testy, overwhelmed, pressured, obligated, caged, trapped, smothered

Play: amused, tickled, playful, silly, childish, childlike, funny, mischievous, devilish, naughty

Freedom: liberated, open, loose, free, uninhibited, creative, alive

Arousal: hungry, thirsty, horny, sexy, attracted, attractive, foxy, alluring, aroused, lustful, desirous, longing, involved, intense, hot, on fire

Indifference: apathetic, unfeeling, unconcerned, alienated, isolated, alone, detached, uninvolved, removed, separated, apart, distant, lethargic, unmotivated, lazy, indifferent

Shame: embarrassed, ridiculous, foolish, ashamed, blamed, guilty, bad, at fault, culpable, wrong

Sadness: disappointed, disillusioned, sad, low, blue, sorrowful, down, depressed, discouraged, lousy, hurt, wounded, dejected, rejected, pessimistic, crushed, upset, miserable, devastated, horrible, grief-stricken

Fear: uneasy, nervous, worried, concerned, troubled, anxious, apprehensive, fearful, timid, shy, disturbed, threatened, scared, frightened, terrified, panicked

Anger: annoyed, irritated, agitated, perturbed, upset, bothered, plagued, frustrated, envious, jealous, exasperated, at wit's end, resentful, unsettled, offended, angry, pissed off, disgusted, bitter, spiteful, steaming, boiling, furious, horrified, hateful, infuriated, enraged

Love: affectionate, warm, kindly, giving, generous, helpful, motherly, fatherly, nurturing, protective, loving, caring, adoring, passionate

Pride: self-satisfied, proud, righteous, superior, strong, virile, powerful, successful, effective, efficacious, in control

Other Suggestions

The following are some additional ways to practice experiencing and expressing you emotions; writing about these in your journal will make them even more effective.

- Watch a movie that arouses some emotion in you. Talk to someone about how it made you feel, or write a few sentences about your reaction.
- Imagine you are someone else—a friend, relative, or acquaintance: Think about how that person feels in a particular situation.
- Listen to the news and observe how you feel about various news items. Use the feelings list from the preceding exercise to be more precise.
- Spend time with a friend who can and does express emotions.
- Remember a time when you felt annoyed, very angry, disappointed, devastated, nervous, afraid, amused, shocked,

elated, confused, disgusted, excited.

- Identify the emotions that are easiest for you to experience.

Which are easiest for you to express? Then identify the emotions that are most difficult for you to experience. To express?

Processing Feelings

The ability to manage, channel, and productively *use* the energy of your feelings is one definition of maturity. In the language of this book, maturity is when your adult (your rational, thinking self) can process and use the raw emotions of your child (your impulsive, feeling self) to negotiate life in the world.

Your adult is your child's advocate, hearing and accepting his or her feelings while simultaneously understanding the demands of the world. Your adult can develop the wisdom to sort out environmental realities and to distinguish internal voices—those of the child and the idea monster.

The basic model that I have used to help clients process uncomfortable feelings involves the four A's: Awareness, Acceptance, Affirmation, and Action. These were introduced in Chapter 9 and are presented here with another example.

The first step in processing feelings cannot be overemphasized: stop everything and *take a time out*. Your brain works so automatically that if you do not interrupt your usual thought patterns; you will continue to have exactly the same feelings and reactions over and over again. So when you have a strong feeling, just *stop*. Give yourself a chance to look at it. You may need to get away from the situation by physically removing yourself from other people. In some way, you need to freeze the action in your mental movie. When you examine this freeze-frame, you can get the clarity needed to make more conscious choices. With more information about your feelings, you have power to change your usual response to a situation.

The following example demonstrates using the four A's for processing feelings. It is based on a real story, chosen because it illustrates the

complexity of sorting out feelings. Real and imagined fears are examined, as well as the issue of responsibility.

The Situation

Jan is a young woman who for many years was deeply involved with a very rigid fundamentalist group in a conservative community. During that time, she tried very hard to conform to the group's expectations for thoughts, feelings, and behavior. She eventually left and since then has struggled to find her own identity and feel secure in her own decisions. One of her reasons for leaving was getting fed up with the bigoted attitudes in the group.

Jan who is Caucasian, recently fell in love with an African-American man, and she is very aware that her religious group would have condemned this relationship. She is at a party and her partner casually takes her by the hand. Jan suddenly feels very uncomfortable and starts to panic.

She thinks, "What's going on? I'm getting really upset. I better sort this out before I blow it." She excuses herself and goes to the bathroom. This is the beginning of an effective intervention. Jan has taken a time out to look at a freeze-frame of her experience.

Awareness

"Why am I shaking? My Little must be scared about something," Jan thinks. She takes a deep breath and focuses on her feelings. "Little Jan is afraid of what people are thinking. She feels horribly vulnerable." Jan pauses to let the feelings register and get some perspective.

Big Jan then observes the monster attack. "My idea monster is telling Little Jan she should be ashamed. Little Jan is being told interracial dating is a sin and she will be punished, and that other people are looking at her and thinking she is disgusting."

Jan pictures herself chasing the idea monster away. The monster slinks off, looking smaller in the light of examination.

Acceptance

Jan imagines holding Little Jan and comforting her. “It’s okay that you are feeling scared. Your feelings are always all right with me. I understand why you would react this way. You're not silly or wrong for having a hard time right now. I'm listening and I'll take care of you.” Jan can feel Little Jan begin to relax as the fear subsides.

Affirmation

After taking another deep breath, Jan focuses on her inner resources, sensing her wisdom and strength within her as a glowing light. Big Jan feels good about taking responsibility for clarifying reality. She continues talking to Little Jan:

You're not bad. That's a crazy idea that comes from a harsh, judgmental value system that we no longer believe in. It's an old memory the monster brought up to scare you so you would behave. But I'm here now, and I'll help you understand how to live and be safe. You are good, and being attracted to this good man is wonderful.

Now, the situation with these other people is a little complicated. They are not thinking you are disgusting. That's monster talk. I know that most of these people at this party are not making any judgments about your love life. Otherwise I would not have brought you to a gathering like this. Some of them might be a little uncomfortable because of general racist attitudes that have been around for a long time. However, the truth is, they don't know any better. They've been programmed, just like you were programmed in some pretty negative ways. We live in a part of the country where it isn't easy to break norms. If someone here reacts poorly to us, that's their problem! We don't have to control or worry about everyone else's feelings.

Just remember that everything will be okay. I'm here and I can handle it. If you get really uncomfortable, I'll take you home. You

are a wonderful, innocent being. Never be ashamed of who you are or whom you love! And remember, it's not so important what other people think anyway.

Action

Before going back to the party, Jan clarifies her intentions to (1) take her partner aside and explain what is happening so that she can get some support, (2) continue talking to Little Jan during the party and visualize her as a happy, innocent, and loving little girl who isn't worrying about other people's opinions, and (3) discuss the incident later in her therapy group. She follows through on these and later does some reading on interracial relationships, which gives her more ideas to support her case for self-acceptance.

Recap

Jan was effective in a number of ways. First, she allowed herself to feel. She stopped and observed her feeling of fear. The simple acknowledgment of emotion is a major step. Jan then refrained from judging or suppressing her feelings while she took time to understand them. She went on to the higher-order skill of rational examination. Fear requires an assessment of real versus perceived threat and a possible need for more safety. Jan was able to reject the monster talk exaggerations of shame and talk to herself (Little Jan) about letting go of that part. At the same time, the reality of social stigma was recognized as a reasonable threat. In response to this fear, Jan took steps to protect and strengthen her.

As you can imagine, each time Jan works through these feelings in this way, she will become stronger and more aware. Her monster talk will be more easily dismissed and real threats more easily handled. She can let other people be responsible for their feelings. Her inner child will feel more and more secure in the care that her adult is providing. Instead of having to be careful, over time Little Jan can learn to be freer to feel.

Another important point to notice again is that thoughts have a powerful impact on feelings. Exaggerated thoughts of threat produce exaggerated feelings of fear. The same is true for other emotions. Exaggerated thoughts of injustice produce exaggerated feelings of anger, and so forth. That is why it is always important for your adult to separate your monster talk. The remaining emotion is then well within your ability to manage. This is often a pleasant surprise!

Exercise 10.4: Freeze-Frame Practice

On a small card, write down the four A's outlined above. You can describe each one in your own words to help you remember. Carry this card with you and review it periodically. When you feel upset and your child is in need, take out the card and read it to help you cycle through the steps. Afterward, write down what you did in your notebook, using the example of Jan above as a model.

If, after an emotional episode, you realize you did not use this method, you can still write it out as if you did, and thereby gain awareness about what you could have done. This will help you the next time. Rather than chastising yourself for not using the steps, notice how much you learn by reviewing the situation.

Two other variations can be very helpful. One is to imagine a situation that frequently presents a challenge for you, a door-opener. For example, you may have strong feelings every Sunday morning because you used to go to church. Your idea monster typically harasses your child, and your whole day becomes miserable. However, you can intervene in a general, preventative way by writing out a “prototype” for how you want to respond. That is, you imagine that it is Sunday and you are having some feelings, so you write a description of the situation and the four A's of handling it.

A second similar variation is to write out a “script” just before going into a challenging situation. For example, visiting your parents may evoke strong feelings for you. If you know yourself well enough, you can do a wonderful

job of preventative self-care by working through these feelings before they hit. Then it will be much easier when the real event occurs.

Writing out this scenario is probably the most powerful way to learn it. However, if you do not like to write, you can also talk it through on tape, or at least think it through in detail. Use your card to help you get each point, making sure you don't skip Acceptance!

When It's Not So Easy

The intervention described above is a sophisticated method of self-care. It is not intended to be a “quick fix” for troublesome emotions. From working with a number of people and using the steps myself, I am aware that it takes practice, and that each step is challenging. Thus it is important to be gentle with yourself as you learn. As you improve in any area, be sure to pause enough to acknowledge and enjoy your growth. For example, if you simply stop and listen to your child more closely, that's great! Gradually, you will develop the component skills for responding to your own needs.

At times, however, you may feel so overwhelmed by your emotions that this procedure becomes too difficult. This can happen when something occurs suddenly, catching your adult off guard, or when your feelings are very intense. When it feels too difficult, it probably means that you are having a “monster attack” and your adult is having trouble responding appropriately. You may identify completely with your child, feeling helpless and desperate. With all that you have been through, it would be natural to feel waves of intense grief, rage, or fear upon occasion.

This kind of emotional experience can be rough. When it happens, there are a few basic things you need to do. First make sure you are safe. Stay in a safe place, don't drive, and don't make any rash decisions. Then, if you can, get someone to be with you for support. Finally, trust yourself to work it through.

Because you may have these volatile times as you recover from your religious conditioning, you should anticipate these emergencies to some

extent and make a plan for handling them. Ask yourself:

- Who can I call in an emergency?
- What will I do if I ever get suicidal?
- Who can I talk to early on when I start to feel bad?
- What will I do for follow up?

Remember that in an emotional crisis you can also help yourself by using the inner advisor approach described in Chapter 7. That is, you can simply allow yourself to *be* the child and look to your inner advisor (your Big or your “higher self”) for protection and comfort. You do this by getting in a safe place and imagining your Big holding you, talking to you, and taking care of you. Cradling a doll or stuffed animal that represents your Little can provide more comfort.

Afterward, it is very important that you forgive and nurture yourself. Look at what you learned and then move on. You can never be perfect and you are learning. Knowing how to self-soothe in a simple way is an extremely valuable skill, and you are learning it.

A second area that does not neatly fit the four A's procedure involves ongoing feelings. Some emotions are not limited just to individual incidents. For example, you may be in a period of deep grief about your loss of an intimate relationship with God. The next chapter deals with particular ongoing feelings related to religious recovery. It is natural and expected that portions of your healing will take time.

In a more continuous way, the four A's also apply to those feelings. You can repeatedly give yourself the gifts of awareness, acceptance, affirmation, and action. Also remember that individual or group therapy may be an important option for you if you are struggling with intense feelings or working on expressing your feelings. Gail had the following to say about her group:

I'm in a support group that's been wonderful. It's been really good for me, because we're all in to learning how to share our truth, what's really truth for us. Sometimes we talk about our feelings or something, and they'll just stop you and say, "God, that's bullshit, what are you really feeling?" And so then I'll have to own my true feeling, and it's okay, because you can be angry, you can do whatever you want, and they still support you.

Afterword

In my dream I am in a house in the middle of a city. My mother and I have been shopping, and we wander into this place, wondering what it is, since it is open and inviting. We find comfortable chairs, magazines, and toys for children, crafts, and TV. It's like a relaxed living room. A man is reading, and a woman is doing needlework. Is this a club of some sort? What is this place? There's no front desk and no one seems to be in charge. We sit down and rest.

Then it's evening and I'm there again, this time with my husband. My mother is also around somewhere. There are a lot of people this time, milling about, socializing. I guess it's a party. They begin to carouse a little more—music, dancing, games, drinking, eating, and laughter, sex. I am talking with a small group, and they remark about how solid I am. They poke me a little and smile at each other. I start to notice that they are different. They move with a fluid motion and seem to be very slightly transparent.

Gradually, it dawns on me that these people are dead and this house is a special place where they can visit and become corporeal again. Somehow they have made a deal whereby they can have their bodies back, but only as long as they stay in the house. They are excited to be feeling everything they feel, especially all the physical sensations. They indulge themselves in every way possible, sensing and feeling to the maximum.

I find it poignant, watching them wring every possible experience they can out of the evening. It is clear this is not their usual state of being. Normally,

they float through the world as spirits, numb to any sensation and filled with frustration. This house is indeed some strange club, and who knows what contract they have made?

The people are friendly at first but then they become more hostile, jealous of us. They are angry with themselves for not living more fully when they were alive and disgusted with us for not appreciating life. The party gets wild as the revelers get desperate. They sexually assault my husband and me since they have all had each other and want novelty.

We struggle to the door to leave and I signal to my mother, beckoning her to follow. She is sitting, chatting with people she thinks are delightful conversationalists. She hasn't caught on and wouldn't believe it anyway, so we simply get her out.

It seems that time is up for the others too. They have to leave and become spirits again. They reluctantly exit the front door and lose their bodies in the process. Mom is oblivious, but my husband and I walk out into the sunshine of a new day, noticing the warm sun on our skin and breathing the fresh air. We walk without speaking, glancing up at the strange movements of clouds in the sky.

Chapter 11

Emotional Recovery

There's a fear that the pain is going to be too great. It's like getting into a cold shower and bracing yourself. You're gritting your teeth and clenching your fists, trying not to feel the pain. But it's not the pain, it's the fear. It's the fear that you can't handle the pain. But think about where you've come from too. If you ever in your Christian background felt that security—"Let go and let God" or "It's okay, trust the Lord; it's in his hands" and those kind of things—that made you feel like you're not alone, like there was some rhyme and reason, somebody holding the reins, but that's not your belief system anymore, where does that leave you?

— Loni

Your journey to wholeness may include some tough times. Because of your religious experience, certain feelings are likely to be difficult, intense, and prolonged. Principal among these are fear, anger, and grief. Accepting and working through these feelings is important, though it may be uncomfortable at times. The alternative of denying your feelings is ultimately more destructive.

Because feelings are unfamiliar to you, you may have an exaggerated anxiety about what it is like to process painful feelings. Like Loni, who is quoted above, you may need to realize that feelings themselves are safe. *Feeling* angry is not the same as hurting someone, for instance. In this chapter the healing roles of awareness and acceptance will be emphasized. The goal of the discussion of each emotion is for you to gain understanding and compassion, thus allowing your child to begin to feel truly accepted, releasing pent-up pain, and enabling needed growth.

In these areas of emotional growth, there are also other resources for you to consider. Good self-help books that specialize in anxiety, anger, and grief

are readily available.

Overcoming Fear and Anxiety

After the security of fundamentalism, you may have attacks of fear that are quite irrational. You were taught to fear the world and to fear hell. Now you feel like you are without the “armor of God” or the “blood of Christ” to protect you, and this can leave you feeling naked and vulnerable. Like a little child without a guardian angel, you may have intense feelings of abandonment. Apart from the church family, you may feel as if you face life alone, and this can test your coping abilities. You may even have moments of panic or nightmares. You might also experience a persistent free-floating anxiety or paranoia. These fears are all based on restimulation of old conditioning, not analysis of real threat.

An example of such an attack of old fear is the nightmare Ron had after visiting the art exhibit, “Thou Shalt Not,” which included a piece addressing hell as a scare tactic that can haunt former believers. Ron had already left fundamentalism, but he still struggled with shedding the guilt and fear:

I stood at the gates of Hell. I was struck with fear. It was unlike any fear I had ever known. It was deep and painful. I walked to a door, opening it slowly. Before I could close the door behind me I heard it: “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The cries of many souls filled my very being. Screams of agony melted together in a sea of fire which was before me. It was a fire that kept them from the ones they loved; it separated man from wife, parent from child, and lover from lover. Is this where family values were found? The bitter tears of a mother began to drown out all other voices. I could hear her strain to sing a lullaby. But her painful song was muffled by the laughing. Again I saw the laughing faces. They spat on the souls which burned, and they laughed.

I awoke with a start. Sweat was pouring off my body. With gasping breath, I realized that I had dreamed. But in this panic, I

needed solace, so I reached for my Bible.

Again it helps to realize how your religion may have affected you. Finding safety is the most primary of human needs, and must be satisfied before other needs can be considered. So the first step in dealing with fear is to have compassion for your frightened inner child. You will in time develop a new kind of confidence.

Exercise 11.1: Providing Reassurance

Your indoctrination was deep and primitive and unjust, whether you were a small child or not. An attack of “you're bad and will be punished” on your inner child is an undeserved distortion of reality. It's important to remember that just because you have a feeling does not mean it is based in reality! For example, just because you are ashamed of your body does not mean you have an ugly body. And just because you get scared about going to hell, does not mean you really are damned.

So to support your inner child, and relieve anxiety, your adult can make a rational examination of your fear. Write down what it is that you are afraid of. Notice how your child feels and what your idea monster is doing. Let your adult analyze what part of the issue is a real threat and what part can be released. Separate out the idea monster talk and let it go, telling your Little that it simply isn't true, as Jan did in the example in the last chapter. This may have to be done again and again.

It may be that you will never completely eradicate the idea that you are doomed. But you can learn to effectively pause and reassure your child each time it comes up. Knowing that this fear is a result of conditioning can help you rise to a higher-order, rational level of processing when it comes up.

A variety of other techniques have been developed for working with fear and anxiety. These include visualization, meditation, relaxation, assertiveness, and desensitization. (One excellent source for such exercises is Edmund Bourne's *Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* , 1990.)

A selection of approaches are described briefly here:

- Physical health . To achieve more physical relaxation and confidence, it helps to be physically fit. When you feel strong and comfortable with your body, you will feel less threatened. Regular exercise and nutrition are thus important. Some people also report a greater sense of personal security with training in self-defense or martial arts.
- Progressive relaxation . In this technique, you work your way through your body, relaxing each part in turn. Beginning either with your toes or with the top of your head, tense up a muscle and then relax it, noticing the difference in sensation. You can also relax by imagining a white, soothing light moving through each body part in turn, bringing healing and relaxation to every cell. When the light has spread through your whole body, allow it to flow freely, returning to any part that retains any tension and releasing it.
- Massage therapy . Massage promotes physical and emotional relaxation. Since mind and body are interrelated, your feelings will follow the wisdom of your body. That is, instead of talking yourself out of being tense, you can treat the muscular tension and let the emotions follow. This is very helpful when your adult is having trouble mastering the idea monster.
- Guided imagery . Mental imagery is a way of directing your unconscious mind to relax and let go of fears. Close your eyes and go to a safe and pleasant place. Visualize a relaxing scene, such as a peaceful spot in the woods, a warm beach, or floating on a raft on a lake. Use all your senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—to enhance the feeling of really being there. Allow yourself some uninterrupted time in this special place, and stay as long as you need to feel strengthened and nurtured.

Is There Any Real Safety?

A craving for protection and security is natural, but life offers no guarantees. No one knows what life will hold or what happens after death. We all have to live with uncertainty.

It takes maturity and strength to handle this ambiguity, which can be quite a challenge after having been told all the answers! I find it helpful to think of safety and security in parts. In the first part, day-to-day living, you can in many ways take control of your life and develop your own resources. You will probably discover that you can provide a great deal of safety for yourself. For instance, being able to self-soothe is a skill that will help your child feel safe. Learning how to manage money, employment, and relationships also creates feelings of security. In general, the more you feel capable, the more comfortable you will be with the changes that go on in life. Developing a network of supportive friends and family is also very helpful. In good times, you can set goals, make decisions, and take actions that enhance your life. With unexpected disasters, you can learn to rise to the occasion and do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

A second area of safety has to do with more ultimate questions of meaning and destiny, such as “Who am I?” and “What is life all about?” Without a neatly packaged religion, you will need to come to terms with these questions for yourself.

In my own experience, and others', this kind of safety has become less of a concern. The absolute need for *answers* has faded. In fact, living with unanswered questions keeps life interesting. Becky found that she was living with more ambiguity, but found it to be quite tolerable. Overcoming the fear in her life was related to trusting herself.

I believe there's an inner voice that I'm just trying to listen to, and that inner voice is I but it's also God. In the past, God has been out there, you know, way out there, and you're a puppet or something. I guess now I have more confidence in myself that I'm doing the right thing when I make decisions, and I don't have the fear. In my recovery, I've gotten rid of a lot of fear of doing the wrong thing, fear of being punished by God, fear of other people or authority figures. A lot of issues are gray for me, like why

certain things happen or why there are really evil people—I can't explain those.

In time, after the earlier stages of healing, people often find comfort in their own, more personal and creative experience of spirituality. (This is the subject of Chapter 15.) They say they have come to appreciate the mystery in life.

Sorting Out Anger

Former believers often feel angry because they feel wronged. This anger can be a healthy reaction to work through, because it means you are taking a stand. It is like the incest victim who no longer blames herself and is able to say “That was wrong!” In order to feel angry, you must have some sense of what you think is right. In the case of “religious abuse,” you may conclude that you deserved and needed different kinds of influences—support for your self-esteem, help with realistic life skills, human love and affection, permission to feel and think for yourself, and so forth. If you did not get these, you may feel angry, as you would if you were not given adequate food or shelter. If you were raised in a very punitive religious environment, you may be understandably angry about the fear and guilt that you continue to live with.

Your feelings in this stage can amount to real rage. Life was once an understandable system. Now you may feel betrayed and abandoned or as if you were tricked. You may feel anger and disgust toward people who continue in the faith. You might resent their attitudes and their preaching. Friends and family members who now reject or pity you can be infuriating.

These angry feelings probably feel “bad” to you. You may be trying to repress your anger and be forgiving. This is what you have been taught. Yet if you do not acknowledge your anger, it can “go underground” and stay with you. Thus it is more productive to accept, understand, and process your anger consciously.

In doing this, it is critical to realize that your anger about your life experience is about your survival— *not* about the wrongdoing of others. We are not talking about blame.

This distinction can be confusing. You need to deal with two different subjects: first the matter of your own experience and then the matter of other people's behavior toward you. In order to give your own inner child the compassion he or she deserves, you need to put the second matter on hold temporarily.

John Bradshaw (1990) uses a physical analogy to explain this concept. If you had been limping all your life, and didn't know why, this would be pretty frustrating. It would be difficult to fully process your feelings. Imagine that the truth was that your parents accidentally ran over your foot as they backed the car out of the driveway. Now you have a right to know this and feel your hurt and anger. No matter what your parents' intentions, this was your experience and you are the one who has lived with the consequences. You deserve to understand and help your inner child with the feelings of unfairness and fury.

So, beginning with honesty about your own experience, you can say to your child, “Yes, I can see that you were very hurt. You did not get what you needed and that was wrong. You were taught things that damaged your life and that makes me angry.” This is validating for your child. As you acknowledge the truth from that perspective, your child will feel saner. This simple acknowledgement is very healing.

To make this distinction, it may help to consider that your parents or church leaders did their best. Everyone does. They raised you or taught you in a particular way because they believed they were doing the right thing. Understanding that and forgiving them, however, are completely different matters. (Chapter 15 covers this in more detail.)

Exercise 11.2: Accepting and Expressing Anger

So what do you do with the anger? Begin with accepting it and expressing it in a way that is safe for yourself . This helps to clarify your internal message of “Stop! This situation is not acceptable, and this is why.” (You are not judging the anger as unacceptable.) A number of strategies are possible.

- *Write about your feelings* . You can write a mock letter in which you express yourself fully. Because you won't be mailing the letter, you can be completely partisan and not even try to understand the other side. You don't need to have complete sentences, use good grammar, or be poetic. You can write to anyone you like—your mother, father, church group, even God. You might want to list all your resentments by beginning a series of statements with “I resent.”

- *Imagine saying aloud what you have written or what you are thinking*. Close your eyes and picture the person listening to you. You are safe and you have the ability to express yourself fully and without reprisal. You “tell them off” and explain why.

- *Use art therapy* . Get some large sheets of paper and crayons, markers, or paint, (or another medium) and use them to express your anger. Without planning ahead what it will look like, simply pick colors that feel right and start in. When you are finished, the piece should have the effect of validating your feeling. It also shows that it's okay to feel; you can express anger without getting out of control.

- *Role-play a conversation* . Get together with a trusted friend or your therapist and role-play how you could express your anger to the person whom you feel hurt you. Say everything you want to say. One powerful format is to speak as an advocate for your child. Like an enraged parent, you can ask, “How dare you treat him like that!” Your friend's job is simply to listen and end with an acknowledgment of your feelings.

- *Talk into a tape recorder about your feelings* . In the privacy of your own home, you can say whatever you want, free-associating and

addressing anyone you like. Verbalizing out loud, will be cathartic and help clarify the issues.

These processes are for you . They build trust between your adult and child by asserting the strength of your self-protective feelings. However, it is important that you do not express everything in this way directly to the individuals concerned . It may be that you will want to express some of these thoughts directly, but this is a different matter. Here we are talking about your internal healing process—your relationship with yourself rather than with others.

Sharon struggled with her feelings of anger toward her father, who had been pious publicly while emotionally abusive at home. She talked her feelings through using a tape recorder at a time she was very upset. The imaginary conversation with her father was a healing experience to address her internalized father and work out a better communication for her inner child. She found that the exercise helped her move forward with processing her anger, much like digesting a meal. She was pleased to find that her rage was reduced rather than heightened by this “ranting.” The style of her expression is a good example of how to simply get out your thoughts and feelings without worrying about the form.

Thinking about you, Dad. And I feel so much anger and I feel so amorphous, what's it about? A thought came to me today—you didn't give me what was mine—my right to be, my right to be a person. To be honored, respected, cherished, nurtured, adored, like a child deserves. I never got that. And you took it another step by taking things away from me—with criticism, with anger, and ... I don't know, it's so confusing, the desperateness of trying to find a place, the feeling I have of trying to be seen. And how is it that when I'm with family, I feel invisible? There's nothing I can do or say that would make me present, that would make you care, in a real way, in a heartfelt way, in a way that would seem like you were moved, that my existence was real.

Confrontation

In some instances, it may be appropriate for you to express your feelings directly to people who have wronged you. This decision can be difficult and is one that you may want to process with a therapist first. It is true that people are responsible for their behavior. Giving a person feedback about harm they have done, whether intentional or not, can be enormously useful. It gives them the opportunity to apologize and make changes. Therefore, you can do someone a service by holding them accountable.

It does not mean that you are calling them bad or wrong. For example, if your mother shamed you every time you were proud of yourself, this was wrong. It probably did serious damage to your sense of self. You can be angry and hurt. However, imagine that your mother was also shamed as a child. She was taught that pride was a serious sin, and that feeling good about yourself in any way meant that you were proud. Her own inner child was probably very damaged. As a mother, she did not have the insight to know that you needed support, not criticism.

In this light, you can see that direct communication with someone who has hurt you is more complicated than just expressing your feelings. If you simply want to rant and rave, you can use the exercises above. You can get it all out, show your child how much you care, and still not attack another person in a way that is not fair or effective. That is, if you want to rave at a person, calling names, and so forth, this is probably best done in private. You can even use props, such as beating an old pillow with a bat, or tearing up a telephone book. But when you address a real person, you should not attack their core being. This would be the same as the abuse you received. Instead, you can focus on behavior.

If you do decide to confront someone, it still helps to do the exercises above first. You can thereby clarify your feelings and decide what you want to say that will best serve your goals. Do you just want to inform someone about your hurt? Or do you want to improve it? Some people just want to blow off steam. Some want to hold people accountable for their actions. Others want

some kind of healing or growth in the relationship. Your communication will differ depending on your objectives.

Another serious consideration is the other person's response. You cannot control this. It might be quite favorable. You might get the attention and caring you want. On the other hand, you could get indifference or anger in return. You might get a fresh dose of abuse. In other words, you could get hurt. No matter how skilled you are at communicating, other people react according to their own “screens” on reality. Even if you are very loving, they can feel attacked and then attack you back. You are not responsible for this. You are only responsible for yourself, including the care of your inner child.

This means that you need to be aware of the full range of possibilities and be prepared to handle them. Do you have a strong and protective relationship with your inner child? What will you do if you are treated badly? Are you ready to mitigate the hurt by providing your own comfort? If you assess the likelihood of a negative response to be high, you need to think about what you hope to accomplish and decide accordingly. If you still feel unsure of your ability to care for yourself, perhaps the confrontation can wait.

If you do feel capable of caring for your child, the communication might be worthwhile no matter how it turns out. In fact, the most valuable part might just be your act of expressing yourself. Getting a positive response would then be icing on the cake. If you try to improve a relationship and do not get a favorable reception, you will still know that you tried. Your child will feel loved that you made the effort, and you won't wonder about “What if...?”

Daniel's is a case in point. He felt very hurt by his experience at a conservative Christian study center. He wrote a letter to the entire organization to let them know about his anger. He also knew that many of the students there were sincere, thinking people, so he wanted them to think about their behavior. Ideally, he wanted them to respond with some caring for him. But he knew that they might simply defend their system of beliefs.

When he wrote the letter, Daniel realized that it was mostly for himself and it was very healing for his inner child. (And, indeed, six months later he still had not received a reply.) Here are some excerpts of his letter:

I came to you full of troubles, lonely, and desperate to be loved. I listened to the case for Christian faith first with suspicion and then with growing conviction. I approached the matter of my salvation with tremendous sincerity and with a deep sense of need. I have made every effort to be honest with myself, both then and now.

[After leaving] I also saw how deeply destructive the Evangelical mentality had been to me, not only as I applied it to myself, but also as it was applied to me as a potential convert. Once someone recites the formula "I accept Jesus as my personal Savior" they have become what they should be and the rest is hardly important ... Overall, the person becomes an object, a thing to be manipulated into the proper configuration. I feel that I was violated by this ideology. I feel that I was seen primarily as a quantity to be shifted from one column to another in God's great ledger book. What happened to me was not qualitatively different from rape, inasmuch as it is a "doing to" rather than a "doing with."

You surely perceive that I am angry, but I am interested in having some sort of conversation. Certainly the seriousness of what I am saying is worth your time and attention. I would hope that you would let it affect you not on the level of ideological challenges and orthodox responses, but on the level of your simple humanity. That is, let it affect you as caring, compassionate people and not as Christian apologists...

Personal Power and Anger

Your self-protective anger is a legitimate feeling. When you become aware of being hurt by powerful others, it is natural to feel helpless rage. But this anger need not be a dead end. A natural next step is to proceed with rebuilding your life. You learn to love and care for yourself, think and feel, make decisions, and enjoy life. Each bit of progress empowers you more,

until your life becomes your own and the anger fades away. Personal power replaces helpless rage.

Jack was in his late twenties and very angry about his religious experience. As a child, he had to go to church, felt guilty much of the time, and tried hard to “feel saved.” Adolescence was especially confusing and painful as he struggled with intense sexual feelings. He acted out by breaking windows and stealing and then prayed for forgiveness. When he was older, he tried even harder to “get it” by going to Bible college.

The system failed to meet Jack's needs and he eventually left the church. Afterwards he bitterly resented the teachings that had hurt him so deeply and the lost life. Speaking of his experience, he was sarcastic and derisive.

For the longest time, whenever I talked about fundamentalism, I found myself getting really angry. I used to watch a lot of Christian TV and got really angry. It stirred a lot of emotion, but I don't know why. I know I'm angry at the rigid approach to life. The supposed “all the answers you ever need are right here” perspective.

When I talk to someone who is trying to proselytize others or give their bullshit perspective on abortion or homosexuals or women's rights, then I get angry. That makes me angry because I know exactly where they're coming from, and that's this rigid, nonthinking approach to life—there's nothing to it.

Jack decided he wanted to heal and change. He got into personal therapy and began to examine his issues. Without condemning his anger, he went on with the next step of taking responsibility for the rest of his life. He identified areas where he needed to grow and invested energy in making changes. In a matter of months Jack was feeling more content and hopeful about his life. He had responded to the needs of his own wounded inner child and could see new possibilities in his life. With a little surprise, he remarked “I don't have nearly the same anger anymore.” His anger had served its purpose.

So rather than worrying about your anger or trying not to be angry, it works better to continue taking charge of your own life. Because you are clearer about what was *not okay* in the past, you can proceed now with making things different for your child in the present. Your anger can be a great energizing force, giving you the determination you need.

Ironically, the beliefs you were taught may contribute directly to your anger. You were taught to be helpless and dependent, relying totally on God and the church for everything. Thus it is probably easy to feel like a victim and to blame, rather than taking responsibility for yourself.

Another belief that might now contribute to your anger is the assumption that life is fair, that there is ultimate justice. As an obedient and special child of God, you were entitled to a superior, victorious life, both here and for eternity!

Thoughts like these can exacerbate feelings of anger—thoughts about shoulds, blame, and helplessness. So, in addition to self-nurturing, you will need to clean out your “idea closet” in this area as well.

Part of your growth will be to accept life as it is. There are no rules about what should happen to you or anyone else. This may be tough to swallow but it can also be very liberating. Viewing life as a learning experience can help you let go of the notion of fairness and feel some relief from your frustration.

Begin by listing the anger-arousing thoughts that your idea monster feeds to your child. Then examine them one by one and replace them with new ideas from your caring adult. Remember that you don't need to believe your new thoughts on a gut level. You are responsibly creating the attitudes you want to have in your life, and it will take time for them to feel natural and obvious.

Again, note that monster talk is exaggerated and focuses on problems without considering any possibility for change. In contrast, your adult messages can be realistic and accepting of facts. Feelings can be accepted

and borne. In addition, your adult does not stop with the past but takes responsibility to make new decisions for the present. The adult offers the child hope, and hope diffuses anger. Here are some examples:

Monster Talk

They made you waste a lot of Sundays, and that's horrible. You'll never make up for it. You'll be miserable on Sundays for the rest of your life.

Your friend Jane expresses herself with such confidence. It's not fair.

You're a mess. You're totally unprepared for life.

You can't dance because you were taught it was a sin. That's terrible.

New Idea

You spent a lot of Sundays in church. How do you want to spend them now?

It's too bad your self-esteem was not encouraged. Let's address it now.

You have some valuable strengths because of your faith. Let's figure out what else needs to be learned.

You can learn to dance now!

Working Through Grief

Grief is even more honest and vulnerable than anger. It is another phase of healing. It means that you recognize and value the thing, which is lost. In fact, when you grieve a loss, it says a wonderful thing about you—you have the ability to feel deeply about something; you have the courage to cherish even though it means risk.

You may notice that, as you let go of your insistence that life be fair, your anger about certain injustices softens into grief. You do not need to be naively positive. In the exercise above, the statement “It's too bad your self-esteem was not encouraged” contains real sadness. Grief is more difficult than anger, in a way. Anger can be blustery and blaming, conveniently keeping the hurt at bay.

Grief is quieter and deeper. It takes more courage to feel grief. But grieving is a necessary part of processing old wounds and healing from them. By fully recognizing your losses, you can also better create replacements for your child.

Losses Due to Religion

You probably incurred some losses *because* of your religious involvement. For example, you may feel you did not really get to be a child; you may not have had a time of innocence and playfulness. If you were raised with a religious worldview, your parents may have taught you to be serious and responsible beyond your years, worrying about your sins. You may never have learned to believe in yourself and your own worth.

Many ex-believers look back and feel sad about experiences that they missed because of a rigid and repressive lifestyle—dating, dancing, movies, and “fun” in general. You may also feel losses related to decisions made as an adult. If you made career and marriage choices based on “God’s will,” you might now mourn what might have been.

These are all losses that need to be grieved. Your inner child needs your comfort like an injured child needs a parent. Mourning the hurts of your past can be much like the grief work done by incest survivors or children of alcoholics. The Appendix lists sources for help with working through grief that are more in-depth than is possible here.

Exercise 11.4: “If I Had Been There...”

Write a letter to your child explaining in detail what his or her past would have been like if you had been present with your current awareness. That is, imagine the kind of care you would have provided for yourself, given your present understanding. Also let your child know what you know about what happened. Actually going back in time is impossible but this exercise can help work through your grief and build trust between your adult and child. Here's an example:

Dear Little Tom,

I understand that you were convinced you were a bad little boy. You were told to read your Bible and pray every day, and this made you very anxious. When you were good, you got very little comment, and when you were “bad,” you got scolded and punished. If I could have been your dad, I would have held you and loved you a lot. I would have told you what a wonderful little boy you are, no matter what you do! I would have encouraged your talents and helped you to appreciate yourself.

I would have given you many things to read and suggested that you think about what you think. Your ideas and feelings would have been very important. I would have wanted you to have fun and be a kid. I would not ask you to worry about the future or about other people. When you got to be a teenager, I would have given you gradual freedoms and encouraged you to talk about your choices and desires. I would have wanted you to have a lot of experiences and to enjoy life. I wish I could go back and do all this for you. It makes me sad that this was not your experience.

Love,

Big Tom

As you read the letter above and as you write your own letter, you will realize that much of what you missed is within your ability to give to your child now. You can have fun now, you can be social, you can have your own thoughts. Getting these needs met, even though belatedly, can relieve some sadness. Rather than feeling deprived or mistreated, you can make the most of what is possible now.

However, some of the damage and lost life is irreplaceable. You cannot be a carefree six-year-old again. Some people attempt to deny the loss. This only underscores the feeling that you don't matter! Rather than neglecting your inner child further, it will be much more healing for you to honestly grieve this loss. It turns out that you can handle the sad feelings. You don't need to suppress your grief in order to survive. When your child's feelings have

been accepted, you might be surprised to feel grateful and more satisfied, ready to go on with life.

Losses from Leaving the Religion

As discussed in Part I of this book, your faith provided you with a lot. Especially if your faith was personally meaningful, and not just a set of rules handed down by others, you have experienced a great loss. This loss can be seen as analogous to other major life losses, including these:

- *Death of parents.* In the course of human development, the loss of parents is often a dramatic and difficult transition. When they die, you are finally on your own. Whether or not they were available to you in a real way, their complete absence from your life can make you feel vulnerable, unprotected, and uncared-for. Losing God can feel similarly painful.
- *Death of a lover.* For many Christians, their relationship with Jesus becomes intimate and central in their lives. Thus, the loss can feel incredible. The loss of your lover is a loss of the feeling of being known and accepted on a deep level. It is a loss of caring and loyalty and pleasure that was rare and special. In human relationships, we know that the death of a spouse is one of the most stressful life events we can ever experience.
- *Loss of fantasy.* Your religion was not merely an offer of support in your life. It was a promise of perfection. God was unconditional with love, attentive to your every need, available at any time of day or night, a good listener, a loyal friend, the eternal companion. One writer has described the Divine Other as an adult equivalent of an imaginary playmate, available to be what ever you want him to be (Cohen 1988).

Losing God can mean a painful sense of disillusionment. It also can be frightening, similar to the realization that parents are not omnipotent and cannot always be there for you. Letting go of these fantasies then, can feel sad, like the loss of a romantic, visionary view

of life. Despite the necessity of this loss, you may well feel reluctant about getting realistic.

- *Divorce.* Because you have some choice about leaving your faith, the loss of God compares easily with divorce. With the end of a marriage, there is often a tortuous struggle between attempts to make it work and painful considerations of leaving. The change is a radical one, and the sense of failure great.

As the one leaving, you may feel guilty. This is especially true in fundamentalist Christianity because of the personal relationship that is emphasized. You don't just walk away from a philosophy, you leave a person—one who *sacrificed and died* for you. The guilt is then magnified when you leave and commit apostasy, described in the Bible as crucifying Christ again. You may feel the heavy guilt of a betrayer, or even a murderer, of a lover or parent.

In a divorce, the person who is “left” typically feels abandoned and betrayed. You may also feel this way in losing your faith because it can seem as if you were tricked. Promises were made that were cruelly untrue. It can feel like Jesus did not save you after all. The perfect love was not real, which can feel like a realization of infidelity. You can feel rejected and inadequate. After being a precious child of God, your self-esteem may take a plunge.

- *Loss of family.* Even though the church group may have been a dysfunctional family at times, it was a place of shared values and goals, continuing relationships, and rituals that gave structure and meaning to your life. For many believers, this spiritual “family” counts far more than their natural families. The loss of an entire family can be devastating. Like a bereft child, you no longer have that circle of familiarity and safety.

Aside from the emotional part, another recognized aspect of grief work involves the task of taking care of you without the help of the loved one. It pushes you toward increased independence and self-sufficiency. Losing God is like losing parents, lover, spouse, or family in this way as well.

Exercise 11.5: Accepting Loss, Feeling Grief

The personal losses listed above all need to be mourned; it is not helpful to minimize the importance of your loss or to suppress your sad feelings. Out of embarrassment, former believes often say things like, “I’m relieved. I don’t miss a thing about it. The only feeling I have is anger about wasting my time.” Circumventing grief work only delays the process of healing.

Thus, the usual recommended approach to grieving is to go through it. Let yourself experience the depth of your feelings and trust your natural healing processes to take you through to the other side. While doing to, keep these points in mind:

Your feelings are safe to feel.

Crying is okay.

Everything you feel cannot be explained.

You feelings are not permanent.

You will not “go crazy.”

You are a good person.

Time does heal.

Things will get better.

A number of symptoms can occur during a period of grieving including anxiousness, loss of appetite, digestive problems, insomnia and nightmares, poor concentration, fatigue and weakness, rapid mood changes, lack of contact with your emotions, loneliness, helplessness, depression, lack of interest in sex, anger, guilt, self-criticism, and suicidal feelings. Knowing these symptoms can help you understand and take care of yourself.

One framework for understanding grief work is in terms of the “tasks of mourning.” Psychologist J. William Worden (1982) lists these four tasks as follows:

- 1, To accept the reality of the loss.
2. To experience the pain of grief.

3. To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.

4. To withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship (in this case, a loving relationship with yourself)

To accomplish your own tasks of mourning, you might consider the following:

Talking about your loss with a trusted friend or therapist.

Writing a goodbye letter to your religion, to God, or to your fantasy.

Having a “memorial service,” in which you honor your experience and then let it go.

Creating a memorial piece or art or writing.

Giving yourself a designated time to grieve on a daily basis, during which you can safely “break down” and cry.

Expressing your sadness through art and/or writing. Let your child be free with this, letting the writing part be “fingerpainting with words.”

Samantha drew pictures and wrote poetry that represented her internal turmoil. In one piece, she created spirals of different colors, representing feelings of sadness, serenity, peace, and joy, all shaded with a gray she said was a spiritual fog, indicating her confusion. At the bottom, the spiral ended in a red tear that was her sadness. A second drawing was large close-up of the tear-shaped sadness, revealing her face inside, with tears coming down. She says she feels trapped in the sadness sometimes and expressing herself helps.

Use this space to express yourself about your loss. This can be drawing or writing or both.

Replacing Losses

Sadness is a feeling that signals a need for self-care. It also carries the information that losses need to be replaced. If you have “adopted” your inner child, you have already begun to do this. You can provide some of your own parenting and you can give yourself the unconditional love that you wanted from God. You yourself can be the significant other, the lover, the best friend that you need. You will also need to take responsibility for finding the other sources of social support you need in your life. If you don't go to church, with whom will you associate? Replacing your community might be a challenge, but it is possible and may be quite necessary.

In addition to the relationship losses, you have also lost a coherent worldview and a purpose in life. These also need to be replaced. Again these are all challenges that are within your capabilities. Other chapters in this book focus on taking charge of replacing these losses—emotional, intellectual, and relational.

It is also important to recognize the need for a profound difference of expectation. Your one permanent loss is the loss of fantasy. You can no longer be blissfully childish and dependent. The world has much to offer, and your life can be very full. However, it will not be perfect in the way you once thought. Relationships, feelings, and daily life—all are very human and down-to-earth. Your challenge is to replace your losses with what is possible, and to joyfully accept those possibilities.

Afterword

As a teenager in love with a fantasy God, I sang “Sweet Jesus” many times—until I began struggling to leave. When I wrote this poem I had the image of a very sticky belief system, but one which I also missed.

SWEET JESUS

You were my yummy Daddy chocolate God
Melted smoothly around my fears
You fed me, fulfilled me.

So sweet, so heavenly
Safely and for safety I loved you
In a warm cocoon I rested.

Then molasses promises
Over time slowed down
Constricting me, scaring me
Desperately I tried getting you out
Sticky peanut butter in my mouth.

And now at times on celery salad days
Crunchy nights and balanced hours
Brave clarity moistens
And sweet Daddy,
I miss you.

Part III:

Growth

I've struggled with learning how to feel. It's really hard for me. Coming from a religious family, I was taught to distrust so much of my own feeling experience, especially if it signaled ill ease with the faith. I learned to deny the world of sensation, to mistrust my physical being. I lived in my head a lot, as a kid, and I was in a lot of physical pain.

So getting into exercise has been an attempt to get out from underneath. I began running and swimming. Both of them have been powerful metaphors in my life: putting one foot in front of the other and feeling pain and not being overwhelmed by it; and because I was afraid of water, swimming and learning I was not going to drown. It's all part of learning to live in a world you're in, which you're not prepared for when you're born and raised that way. Living in your body and loving it.

— Megan

Chapter 12:

Identity and Self-Love

You're brought up with people telling you “God wants you to become like dirt so He can use you, so He can form you into this vessel that He can use for His glory. You're nobody, He's everything, and you're nobody.” I still don't feel like anybody.

— Donna

A positive sense of self is essential for mental health. Followers of fundamentalist Christianity achieve this vicariously through the goodness and forgiveness of God. But now you are faced with this issue directly. Although you may want to love and respect yourself, you are probably carrying some old, negative assumptions about who you are and what you are like.

This is one of the most insidious outcomes of conservative Christian teaching. Even though you were taught that God is love and Jesus is the good shepherd, you could never be loved unconditionally. You were not okay just as you were but were intrinsically bad, weak, needy, and incomplete—all due to events that happened long before you existed. You were saddled with “original sin” before you even had a chance.

The significant aspect of the damage to self in this system is the sense of *shame*. This is in contrast to *guilt*, which refers to behavior, or feeling bad because of what you have *done*. Shame is feeling bad for who you *are*. This feeling can last long past the time you leave your religion. As Camille said:

It's a shame-based, fear-based religion. It makes you hate yourself. That's why people get self-destructive. It feels yucky to hate yourself. My friend Darlene used to drink too much and then drive real fast. I've been suicidal myself. Whenever something's not working you blame yourself. If a relationship has problems, you examine yourself. It took me a long time to figure that out

and get out of a bad relationship. I think this is why some people get into self-mutilation too.

Given the opportunity, self-esteem evolves naturally. For example, small children easily feel pleased with themselves. The attribution of blame to the self and credit to a powerful other, as fundamentalism teaches, is a learned response. In recovering from your religious training, you must reclaim a natural love for yourself.

The first step is to challenge old assumptions. You must then reinforce a new belief system through the ways you think and behave on a daily basis. Gradually, your new beliefs will become accepted on the unconscious level, where they can help guide your life.

Major assumptions that you once had can be understood in three categories: identity, worth, and ability. For each of these, you need to learn new assumptions, which emphasize wholeness instead of holiness.

Old Assumptions		New Assumptions
	<i>Identity</i>	
The individual person is not important.		Each person is special and important.
Unique personal development is not valuable; conformity to Christian ideals is important.		Unique personal development is good, and satisfying and contributes to humanity.
	<i>Worth</i>	
Humans are essentially bad and weak; dependent on God's intervention for salvation.		Humans are fundamentally good and precious, deserving of unconditional love as they are.
The physical body is not valuable.		The body is valuable and deserves respect and care.

Ability

People are devoid of inner resources.

People have enormous potential and natural capabilities including wisdom, strength, and lovingness.

Individuals are not capable of change or growth.

Positive change and growth are positive and natural.

In the sections that follow, these categories are discussed in more detail and exercises for growing in each area are presented. Underlying all of these areas is a deeper assumption that you are real. You do exist. While that may sound strange to say, it is not at all obvious after you were taught to diminish yourself. Religious training in self-annihilation can leave you feeling invisible, without substance. Thus the approach of relating to your inner child can be enormously helpful. In all of the exercises, do your best to picture your child as a real person, with a particular appearance, a voice, a personality, feelings, and needs. To properly appreciate your worth, you need to begin with validating your existence; “seeing” your core self as a child can help you do this. You can get perspective by relating to yourself as an external object. Then, when you imagine a long line of children waiting for your attention and your child is at the end, you’ll know what to do.

Identity

But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is mold say to its molder, “Why have you made me thus?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? (Romans: 9:20–21)

When you were religious, your individual identity was probably of little concern to you. You probably thought that focusing on yourself was selfish and that there were larger issues of greater importance. You may have frequently heard the phrase “Jesus first, then others; self last” or its equivalent. As a result, you may believe you are not important and even feel ashamed when attention is drawn to you.

To fuse with God was considered desirable, to the point of losing your individual identity. To be like Christ was the ideal, not to be you, as in the hymn “Oh to be like him, Oh to be like him, Blessed Redeemer, Pure as thou art.”

Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind ... Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:2, 5)

In many Christian groups, the concept of unity becomes one of uniformity. Individual identity was considered God’s prerogative. God is the potter, people are clay, shapeless, available for God to mold for his purposes.

I was born into a fundamentalist preacher's family, the fifth of eight children. Being so much a part of a church family and my own biological family, I don’t ever recall as a child having a sense of my own individuality. It was more important for me to fit in and be a part of my religious group. I was very much awed by any authority figure and felt anyone older was automatically wiser and better than me. I had no answers in me other than what I had been taught by the church and my parents.

I did not leave home until I married. I had no confidence in my ability to make it on my own. I felt I would just get married—probably to a minister since that was God’s highest calling—and raise a family. I met my husband in the church young adult group when I was twenty. He was leaving a promising engineering job soon to attend seminary. Must be God's man for me. I went from a dependent child role to a dependent wife role.

— Debbie

Exercise 12.1: Exploring Your Uniqueness

Ordinarily, a person's “sense of self” comes from awareness and ownership of personal, subjective experience. This requires a respect for your feelings

and trust in judgments you make based on these feelings. You understand the unique patterns of your own life, consisting of the hundreds of choices you make daily in the way you think, feel, and behave. This is what makes you who you are. When you leave fundamentalism, you may find that because you have not been free to make your own choices, your personal identity is far from clear. Like Debbie above, you might need to get to know yourself.

A mature human being is like a rich oil painting. The years of experience are like many layers of paint that interact to create the final effect. The process is slow and cumulative, blending and changing, but the changes are neither random nor mysterious. The color combinations produce effects that are tangible. Similarly, the events of your life have combined in understandable ways to bring you to where you are today.

You are a beautifully complex being, rich with detailed layers. Your task in this exercise is to imagine yourself in a room full of people; then describe yourself, non-judgmentally, in a way that would make it impossible for anyone to say, “That’s me, too.”

Write your description in the third person, as if you were the main character in a novel. Help the reader appreciate this character as having a unique place in the world. Refer to yourself with your name and “he” or “she.” This will help you disengage and describe more easily and with compassion.

Consider the following questions in describing your “protagonist,” along with any others you think of or want to explore:

- *Physical description.* Describe not just your height, weight, and age, but how you carry yourself, stand, and sit. What is your facial expression in repose? What do you look like when you’re happy? What is your voice like? Your laugh? How do other people respond to you? Do you listen more or talk more? Do you have distinctive habits or gestures or figures of speech that you use often?

- *Mental and emotional makeup.* What is important to you? What do you value? What are your interests? Your dreams? Are you idealistic, realistic, romantic? Do you analyze things or take them as they come? Is truth or compassion more important to you? What do you most enjoy? What are your pet peeves?
- *Your origins.* What has made you who you are? Are there key events or people in your life that have shaped you? Do particular memories resonate for you or have a special significance that you alone are aware of? Does your family's history—where they came from, the kind of work they did, or the lives they led—contribute to the person you are?

Use this space to describe this person that is you.

Worth

It may also be difficult now to fully love and appreciate yourself, since your religion taught you self-alienation. The Christian message of salvation is based on your feeling bad enough to need saving! It is likely that now in a deep, unconscious way, you still believe you are basically bad.

As a result, you may also feel helpless. If you are held responsible for something, yet given no method of redeeming yourself, it is impossible to feel any other way. As a Christian, you were obligated to attribute anything beautiful or loving or wise to God. To actually become good or strong in you would be blasphemous—trying to become like God. Satan was cast from heaven because he wanted to become like God.

Even the worth you achieved by being a child of God was conditional, based on your salvation status. In addition, remember that sin was also defined as being less than God intended for us to be. Romans 3:23 is quoted often: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” The

message here is to feel guilty for being inadequate. When sin is defined this way, nothing you do is ever enough.

Not only the spiritual, but also the physical self is denigrated in the fundamentalist framework. Your spiritual existence is exalted and your “flesh” is considered evil and dangerous. Sexuality and passion are feared temptations:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would ... And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:16–7, 24)

Nowhere in the Bible is the body discussed with respect. Health and beauty and physical pleasure are treated as nothing compared to the eternal things of the Spirit. Rather, the natural urges of the body are always highly suspect. You are expected to keep careful control of yourself and beware of the trouble your body can cause.

Even where the Bible refers to the body as God's temple, the context is a discussion about immorality and the sinfulness of sex. And note that your body is not yours—it is owned by God (Corinthians 6:18–20). This negative attitude toward the body affects the concept of the self.

Recognizing Your Value

One impact that these messages about evil and sin have on the recovery process is to cause you to focus on the negative. If your good behaviors were not yours to own, while your sins required great concern, then you were always alert to what was “bad.” When you prayed, you may have thanked God for good things, but you were not supposed to reflect on any positive things you yourself had achieved. You could not be like a little child who proudly reports to a parent and gets a pat on the head.

Instead, anything good you did was discounted and disowned. Mistakes, of course, were confessed with what you thought was appropriate guilt. As a result, you may now have difficulty thinking accurately about yourself. You are likely to be acutely aware of your faults and sadly oblivious to your strengths. It probably feels wrong—self-centered and proud—to even acknowledge good things about yourself. Receiving well-deserved recognition from others can feel shameful and uncomfortable.

One of the most painful struggles in my own life has been the effort to reconcile an innocent, childlike need for love and attention with an acute feeling of shame whenever I am the focus of attention. As a child, I tried to get approval by achieving A's in school, doing artwork, extra science projects, and being involved in athletics. Yet no matter what I did, it was never enough to get what I really wanted—to be told that I was wonderful and lovable and precious. Instead I was given clear messages that any focus on myself was sinful. I tried hard to be a good Christian girl, accepting that selflessness was my goal. Yet my needs did not go away! The double bind was constant and painful but completely beneath my own awareness. It is only in retrospect that I recognize my struggle to be loved and to feel important.

One of my most excruciating and confusing memories is about the time I won a science fair in grade school. I had worked hard and was thrilled to have my parents attend the awards assembly. Yet when they called my name and I had to walk down the center of the filled auditorium to receive my prize, I was in unbelievable agony. I simply couldn't accept the idea that I had done something good and deserved the attention. Deep down, I believed I was not important and that calling attention to myself was very, very wrong.

Hard as it may be in the beginning, however, a major step in your recovery is to be able to accept that you are an innocent and basically good being. You are a part of nature and you are beautiful in many ways. Your inner being is wonderful, and you have a truly amazing body.

This takes us back to the concept of the innocent child, born with basic goodness. You still are this innocent child. You may have personality traits or behavior patterns that do not serve you well at this time in your life, but your basic core is essentially good. It is possible to understand your faults, retain a concern about needed changes, and still view yourself as basically good. You can recognize that you have learned a great deal in your life, both positive and negative. Negative patterns can develop in response to complex situations when there is an absence of positive models. As a child or as an adult, you may not have the information, or even the opportunity to learn an effective method for handling a certain life situation.

For example, a child in a chaotic, alcoholic family may learn to lie as a way of surviving. The secrets of the family needed to be covered up. If dad's boss calls, you say that dad is sick instead of drunk. You also lie to yourself about life, saying that your parents are okay and life is fine. What else can you do as a child? You can't go out in the street and find a new family. So instead you survive by twisting reality.

Consequently, you might find that later in life honesty is a difficult issue. Yet it would be a big mistake to simply label your lying as evil. It enabled you to survive. By itself, this has been an unconscious, innocent, and highly successful achievement! You can respect it as a coping mechanism and recognize its function in your life.

This does not mean that you will want to use these same coping mechanisms for the remainder of your life. With the burden of self-hatred lifted, you can more easily decide to change the behavior patterns that are not helping you now and develop new ways of getting your needs met. Identifying an old coping method does not make anything "wrong." It opens a door for natural evolution as changes in your life occur.

The important point in all this is self-acceptance and self-respect. You were not born with the desire to be unhappy or to hurt others. You do not get up in the morning and think, "How can I make myself miserable today?" You do what you can with the knowledge you have at the time. Your behavior

patterns are the adaptations that you have made to the particular circumstances of your life. They are special, and you are a *perfect* example of someone who has adapted to your life!

As an analogy, imagine a tree growing on a windy hillside. The tree has become bent from the wind and rain and now has a special shape that tells the story of its life. It has departed from the prototypic straight and symmetrical tree. The real tree has made a special adaptation to its unique life experience—it is no more “wrong” than any other tree. It is strong and healthy and more beautiful because of its experiences.

Similarly, you are “right” and perfect in being you. You have adapted to the storms of your own life. You have many magnificent qualities that you can learn to appreciate more completely.

Exercise 12.2: Self-Appreciation

Try one or more of the following three ideas for increasing the value you place on yourself.

List at least fifty things you like about yourself. This might feel like a challenge, but go ahead and push yourself! If this process feels wrong and egocentric, just notice that discomfort, recognize it as part of the negative training you have had, and continue writing.

For example, your list might begin like this:

1. I am kind.
2. I am a good listener.
3. I love my kids.
4. I have a nice singing voice.
5. I look good in blue.

Keep a simple journal for two weeks or so. Each day write down the positive things you did and the strengths you noticed in yourself. If you are

tempted to write about problems, remember that the goal of this exercise is to learn self-appreciation. Problems can be addressed in time.

When Lauren wrote the following entries, she realized there was a lot she could be proud of:

Monday

- Wrote a letter to my sister, enjoyed the process instead of hurrying. (I'm pretty good at keeping in touch with family.)
- Started a novel. (I like that I read a lot.)
- Gave my neighbor some vegetables from my garden. (I'm very generous.)

Tuesday

- Visited my daughter's classroom and read a book to the kids. I was funny, and they had a good time. (I like my playfulness with kids.)
- Invited my daughter's teacher to dinner. (I'm good about staying involved in her education.)
- Chatted with the mailman. We're on a first-name basis and talk occasionally. (I like my openness to people and how they trust me.)

Wednesday

- Wrote some poetry. It was hard and I'm not very good, but I did it anyway. (I like that I'm interested in learning new things.)
- Got a workout at the gym. (I'm good about exercising.)
- Paid bills. (I don't mind living modestly.)

As the days go by, you can enjoy the change in your perception. You may want to continue this exercise for a much longer period, as you learn to love yourself more. If you have practice of keeping a journal, this could be a permanent addition to your writing.

Make a list of all your “faults.” Then beside each one write how it has functioned in your life. Thank each “fault” for the way it has helped you survive, for example: Amelia came up with the following list:

Shy about meeting
new people

It takes the pressure
off to make conversation
and I avoid rejection
and feel safer

Compulsive about
cleaning

As a child, doing chores
well made me feel
needed and appreciated;
doing them early and
constantly and without
being asked was a way
to avoid criticism and
punishment

Not good about
being active in
friendships

By not calling or
writing, I don't have to
risk feeling unimportant
if they don't respond,
and the friends I do
have do all the work
and I feel valued

Working too hard,
being constantly
overcommitted

As a child, staying very
busy was a good way to
avoid noticing the
family problems and
feeling bad

Oversleeping

Staying in bed always
made me feel safe and
protected, in a private
space, away from others

Notice the expanded feeling of self-love that this exercise gives. You have embraced your whole self and not just the acceptable parts.

You Have a Fabulous Body

Your religious training taught you to reject and neglect your body. Now you can reclaim this mode of experiencing yourself. You are not just your mind; you are your body as well. This is very different from saying that you *have*

a body, as if it's a vehicle that you ride around in, as if it's something you have to take care of solely because you want to use it for a while.

In contrast, consider the notion that your physical being is you as much as are your mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. With this awareness, you can let yourself come down out of your head and experience your body. Think about the amazing things that your body does repeatedly and easily: your heart pumps away constantly; your blood travels thousands of miles, taking fresh oxygen and food to every cell; your lungs continuously process air; your digestive system absorbs what ever you eat or drink; your skeleton provides support; and your muscles give you the ability to walk and run, dance, and swim. Your body is not just “flesh”; it is a truly amazing and beautiful thing!

In your daily life you can find opportunities be more aware of your body and enjoy yourself in a physical way. For example:

- When you are walking, focus on the feelings in your body. Try different ways of walking—leisurely, briskly, with confidence in your posture, with grace like a dancer, lightly, or very slowly—noticing the careful coordination of all your muscles.
- Include more dance in your life—at home rocking out privately to music, taking a dance class, or going out on the town.
- Get a professional whole-body massage.
- Enhance your sex life. Explore what you can do to increase your sexual pleasure—reading about it, experimenting, taking a work shop, or just letting yourself have more—always practicing safe sex, or course.

Remember that your body is you. It's not your car or your house or somebody else's temple. As you love and respect yourself more you will want to take care of your body. Getting good nutrition, proper rest, and exercise will be things you want to do. If you are not happy now with your weight, health, or appearance, consider making changes out of loving care. Exercise can be an enjoyable celebration of your physical being.

The body visualization exercise that follows is a useful accompaniment to making behavioral changes. You can also give yourself a regular message such as: “I will treat my body today as the precious and wonderful being that I am. Eating well, resting, and exercising are ways that I can express my love for myself. I can enjoy myself in my body.”

Exercise 12.3: Body Visualization

Find a time and place where you can relax and be undisturbed for about twenty minutes. Record the following guided visualization, speaking slowly, and then replay it with your eyes closed.

Begin by leaning back or lying down in a comfortable position ... breathe deeply several times ... in and out ... in and out ... letting yourself relax with each breath ... letting go of tension each time you exhale ... Take your time to become comfortable and quiet, letting this be a special time for you ... inhale ... exhale ... inhale ... exhale ... and as you breathe, gradually become aware of your body, noticing where you have your arms and hands ... the feeling in your legs and feet ... the sensations in your torso ... the rise and fall of your chest as you breathe ... the way your head feels ... notice how your clothes feel on your body ... feel the air on your skin ... and just let yourself become sensitive to all that you can physically experience in this moment. As you notice these external sensations, also become aware of your internal experiencing ... Let your center of consciousness come down from your head, where you do all your thinking and analyzing, down into your body ... into your torso ... moving around and feeling your inner being ... without examining ... just accepting and noticing ... the beat of your heart ... the breath in your lungs ... the feelings in your belly ... your genitals ... your lower back ... your upper back and shoulders ... gradually letting your awareness move into your limbs ... down your arms and into your hands ... down your legs and into your feet ... just letting yourself be a body ... a wonderful being ... everything working together ... circulation, respiration, digestion, muscles, bones,

immune system, nervous system, emotions, thoughts ... creating and continuing life.

And as you lie still you can be aware of the energy that is coursing through your body ... the life force ... the life energy that is you ... and you can appreciate this more fully ... letting go of the judgments you have had about your body ... imperfections you have worried about ... just letting them go as you realize the beauty and physical miracle of your being”

And as you continue breathing, imagine going somewhere outdoors where you can be alone ... a place that is pleasant and safe and refreshing to you ... and take a minute to settle there and be aware of your environment ... As you feel comfortable begin to move around, experiencing the movement of your body ... You are alone and in complete privacy ... You can take this time to enjoy yourself in any way you desire ... breathe and relax and move ... You can walk or run, or fly or dance or swim ... You can take your clothes off if you wish ... feeling the sun and breeze more directly ... This is your time to celebrate your body and notice more clearly who you are as a physical being ... you can lie down if you wish ... you can look at yourself ... and you can touch yourself ... Take as much time as you want for this experience, letting a joyous new realization sink down deeply within you ... This is your body ... it's beautiful ... it's wonderful ... it can provide you with great pleasure ... you can love and appreciate yourself in this way ... this is you.

When you feel completely finished, take a very deep breath to signal your body to come back to your current time and place ... Sit up and stretch, and bring back with you the feelings of refreshment and new awareness.

Ability

Along with a vague identity and a sense of being bad, the fundamentalist Christian often has a self-image that is *empty*. This is a result of believing that a human being is full of sin, which is “cleaned out” only by God's redemption. After that, the person is a shell, to be filled with the Spirit of

God. Once saved, the Christian is to rely on God to provide the necessary resources for living: strength, wisdom, loves for others, peace, joy, and so forth. These resources are not yours, but God's. You are a child of God, his property, and “bought with a price.” You are considered dependent on God for your life and for your ability to live life.

Growing up, I remember how much we considered it a privilege to be a *channel* for God. It was exciting to have access to the power of God. If you thought you had any personal strength, you were treading on dangerous ground. A familiar quote was “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). Satan's fall from heaven was because of pride (Isaiah 14:12–15). Self-reliance in the fundamentalist framework is the essence of sin. If you considered yourself capable, then you didn't need God.

The unavoidable result of this is that fundamentalists must view themselves as helpless and empty beings that can only be effective when relying on God. Your success at any particular time depends on your availability to God's channeling. If you experience failure, it must be because you haven't allowed God to have his way through you.

This mindset can become a severe problem when you leave the fundamentalist fold. In secular circles, there is a greater emphasis on teaching children to have confidence in them. Intuition, knowledge, skills, character, and personal maturity are considered important qualities and assumed to increase and improve over time, ultimately resulting in happy, capable, functioning human beings. Over time, children are expected to separate from parents and gradually learn to take care of themselves.

In contrast, the fundamentalist Christian is expected to remain a child emotionally. You are “born again” but may not get very far past infancy in your sense of self. Therefore, many people who break away feel small and helpless. It can be frightening to realize you have to grow up.

Using your own judgment, comforting yourself, being strong in hard times, expressing your own love, taking assertive action—these can be new for

you. Having been taught that God was your “source,” it is understandable that you would now lack *self-efficacy*, the belief that personal efforts pay off. Even if you want to believe that you have what it takes within yourself, it can feel risky to reach inside if deep down you think you are an empty shell.

It is important now to begin “tapping your inner resources” even though it creates anxiety. You need to make it a priority to recognize and learn respect for the richness of your inner being. Far from being a mere shell, you are immensely capable. We all are!

It's time to take back your birth right and be who you really are and can be. You need to reclaim yourself. Your inner being continues to evolve and is innately capable in many important ways: providing self-nurturance, giving and receiving love, generating creative ideas, evaluating information and making wise decisions, exercising amazing strength and courage, generating joy, experiencing peace, enjoying humor, and more! Furthermore, these are capabilities you have now, not far off potentials for you to realize.

It's not as though you were once a channel for God and now you are becoming your own person. You have been a capable human being all along. You have always had immense capabilities. You were simply taught to attribute *your* strengths to God. It may be true that the belief that God was working through you was helpful in developing your abilities, but they are your natural abilities, and you can continue the growth process on your own.

Learning to trust yourself is a process that takes time. Each time you have faith and follow the lead of your inner voice, you will gain in confidence. You will become better and better at evaluating the ideas of others and coming to your own conclusions. With practice, you will increase your ability to tap the resources within—all the love and joy and peace you need to enrich your life.

Stopping Discounting

Discounting is a thought process that alters reality by making something less important than it really is. When you discount yourself, you make yourself less significant and less powerful. Discounting can be spoken or mental. When a friend says to you “Thank you so much for what you did for me,” and you say, “It was nothing,” you probably discounted yourself. When someone hurts you, and you think, “It doesn't matter to me,” instead of sharing your feelings and making an assertive response, you have discounted again.

You can discount your own value and your own power. If you fail to return a defective item to a store, you are discounting if you decide they won't listen to your complaint. Discounting is prevalent in dysfunctional families, where children are not taught to value themselves and respect their own power.

Four levels of discounting are outlined in the book, *Growing Up Again*, by Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson (1989):

1. Discount the *existence* of the situation, problem, or person: “That's no problem.”
2. Discount the *severity* of the problem: “That's no biggie.”
3. Discount the *solvability* of the problem: “You can't fight city hall.”
4. Discount your *personal power* to solve problems. “Nothing I can do about that,” or “Their needs are important; mine aren't.”

As you work on changing your outlook about yourself, this is a special area to notice. You can practice acknowledging yourself more by saying, “You're welcome” to people and letting yourself be important. When you have doubts about your ability to do something, listen to yourself and see if you are discounting your power.

Exercise 12.4: Inner-Self Visualization

This exercise is designed to help you notice and appreciate the reality of your inner self. Repeating it frequently will aid in overcoming feelings of

emptiness and weakness. Over a period of weeks, the cumulative effect can be quite powerful—certainly worth the investment.

Record the following visualization on tape. When you want to use it, find a time and place to be quiet with yourself for fifteen minutes or so. Make yourself physically comfortable, take several deep breaths to relax, and play the tape back.

Let your body slow down and rest, releasing the tension in your muscles as you think about the parts of your body and let go ... taking this time for you ... letting your awareness come down in to your body ... allowing yourself to feel more grounded and centered.

As you breathe and relax more deeply, you can gradually become aware of the center of your body ... your chest cavity or solar plexus ... and breathe into that area, beginning to visualize it in your mind ... and becoming aware of yourself there ... an image of your essence ... your inner being ... feeling the presence of your inner self ... noticing aspects ... color, a glow, light, or radiance perhaps ... that is particular to you ... whatever you notice ... movement, flowing, or filling ... or stillness ... temperature ... a warmth or soothing coolness ... any sound ... or texture ... any changes ... rhythms ... just allowing yourself to be real ... and feel the intensity of your inner presence ... letting it fill your consciousness ... and fill your body.

Take time to appreciate yourself and what you are learning ... take all the time you need to let this awareness sink in, that you have a rich and real inner being, ready and waiting to be more evident in your life ... an immense potential for you to appreciate ... Just breathe and feel ... and enjoy this awareness until you have completed what you want for now.

When you are ready, take a deep signal breath and return to the present time and place, letting yourself continue the rest of your day with an enhanced awareness of your inner self.

After you finish visualizing, a useful follow-up is to draw some representation of your inner self. Using crayons, chalk, or oil pastels, sketch something simple that feels like you. Post it somewhere to remind you of your inner essence.

Chapter 13

Living Life Now

I was thinking about how much we work and forget to enjoy the results. It's like someone preparing her home for a party, making it neat and clean and beautifully decorated. She loves the perfection of her work so much that she is annoyed by her guests. They disturb her perfect living room by coming in. So after a time, she stops inviting guests, stops having parties. She simply prepares her home again and again. Only once in a great while, she wonders what she's preparing *for*. Many people are like this woman—perfecting order and missing the party.

— Karen

This chapter is about enjoying your present life: What a concept! One of the saddest aspects of the fundamentalist mindset is the way it can rob believers of being in the world and tasting its pleasures in the present.

After leaving the faith, it may take a long time to feel at home in the world, to allow yourself to have fun. Knowing how to live with ordinary daily happiness is a real skill. It takes maturity to appreciate the world as it is, and to accept other people as both ordinary and wonderful.

As discussed earlier, fundamentalist Christianity, along with other religious systems, teaches separation from the “world.” The world is considered fallen and corrupt and pleasure in the present is worthless compared to the hereafter. As a Christian you often feel alienated from the rest of society, but that's okay because you are expected to feel separate. Church songs emphasize a glorious existence elsewhere: “In the Sweet Bye and Bye,” “When We All Get to Heaven,” and “I'm Marching to Zion.” And, in comparison with all of eternity, the importance of earthly life is minimized.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the

world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (I John 2:15–17)

Fundamentalist Christians rarely think about getting the most out of life or maximizing their human relationships. This is not to say Christians have no fun. Within the subculture there are acceptable enjoyments and some groups are more relaxed than others. However, isolation from the world is maintained and unbridled pleasure is seen as dangerous. A focus on the hereafter makes it illogical and difficult to invest in a career or any other chosen pursuit. Most tragically, it is difficult for believers to make deeply human commitments to each other if they are not fully present.

Many human achievements cannot be celebrated because of comparison to spiritual, heavenly ideals. For example, instead of rejoicing in the wonders of a symphony performance, the music of angels is considered superior. The same goes for the natural world—a spectacular sunset is seen as only a hint of God's glory, a “foretaste of things to come.” Thus the believer is never really allowed to *be here*, immersed in the joyous experiences of this life. Instead, the present world is seen as essentially hopeless, the dominion of Satan in which no amount of human endeavor can ever amount to anything, and which is doomed to Armageddon besides. For the individual, focusing on the end of the world can have serious consequences, as Antoine relates:

For me, it came down to a very personal level, a sense that it wasn't really worthwhile to do the things to make the world a better place or to make much effort at self- improvement because *it's all going to burn*. That was the favorite term I heard when I was growing up, “It's all going to burn.” Meaning that when Jesus returns, the whole world's going to disappear anyway, so why bother painting pictures or making music beyond what's religious, because the nonreligious will cease to exist in the near future. I was interested in archeology, but my fundamentalist friends told

me I was crazy. Why should I look into the past, to uncover the past of secular societies, when Jesus was coming back and none of it was going to matter anyway?

The world was coming to an end. Why bother?

With such a belief system, it makes no sense to treasure the planet, preserve a healthy home for future generations, or work for peace. (In fact, it is frightening the way that some Christian groups get excited when war breaks out, hoping that the end may be near.)

Virtually anything can be seen as dangerous, luring the Christian to love something more than God. Thus, in addition to avoiding the obvious temptations of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” you must also beware of science, the arts, “secular humanism,” spectator sports, even gardening if it takes your eyes off Jesus.

Emotionally, the devout Christian is insulated from the world and present life. Both the best of life and its problems are ignored. If this is not your home, you have little investment and a limited sense of responsibility or self-efficacy. If you believe powerful forces of darkness control the earth, you also feel helpless when facing significant human issues.

Letting go of this old approach to life means forming new assumptions to live by. If you now believe you want to enjoy your present life, the following statements can be your new assertions, addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

- The earth is my home; I belong here.
- The world is a good place, full of resources and meaning for me.
- I can have a pleasurable life.

Learning to Feel at Home

Wanting to belong is a natural human need. We want to belong in our families, our social groups, and our neighborhood. We all need some form of community. Your inner child needs to feel connected too. Yet with the

messages you probably received, it would be hard to feel that you fit in this world. Many exfundamentalists struggle with adjusting to the secular world. They report feeling like misfits, unconnected to what's going on.

In one of my religious recovery groups, we made drawings of ourselves in the world. Most of the participants expressed this feeling of displacement. One man drew himself as a leaf being blown around. Another image was of a man in a business suit stiffly playing his social role. The same man also portrayed himself as a football player and a bloodied boxer, fighting for a place. A third drawing was by a woman, who drew an attractive nature scene. Falling off the edge of the page was a figure trying to get into the scene and be a part of nature but unable to. All three of these people expressed a desire to be a part of the world now, without quite knowing how.

A major aspect of your feeling comfortable in the world will be gaining some understanding and acceptance of the secular world. Depending on the nature of the particular religious group you were in, you may have feelings of judgment, fear, or awkwardness. These are natural feelings. The fundamentalist subculture is a world unto itself, as are many religious groups. When you leave and join the rest of the world, it can feel like moving to another country and trying to assimilate into another culture. It takes time, effort, and openness to gain the knowledge you need and the comfort level you want. If you remember that you are like a newcomer or a child as you adjust, you can be more self-supportive in this process. Learn as much as you can about your environment. Have some courage. It can be exciting to expand your horizons, much like moving to a new town. When you decide that this is indeed your home, you can learn to enjoy the process of adjusting and find out what it has to offer you.

Exercise 3.1: Writing a Letter of Welcome

At first you may find it challenging to “make yourself at home.” Shifting to a lifestyle of involvement in the world means a change of very basic assumptions. Your idea monster may have a lot of negative comments to

make about living life now. To protect your child and promote cognitive change, watch out for lines like these:

It's wrong to care about the world.

You don't belong here. What a misfit!

Don't bother trying to be happy.

The world is just a rotten place, and too hard to change.

People are stupid and full of pride.

Watch out! New things are dangerous!

If it's fun, it must be wrong.

You can begin to help your inner child feel at home by writing him or her a letter refuting the religious ideas and the monster talk about the world that have been evoked in the past. For example, you might write something like this:

I know that you may feel uncomfortable in the world. That's understandable—you were told that you don't belong here.

But I want to tell you now that you do belong here. This is your home. Just like the squirrels and the deer and the birds, you too have a home on this earth. You have a life to live and the right to enjoy your life. You can relax and be present. You don't need to plan for another life or work on other people. You are welcome to make yourself at home by doing whatever you like. You can help yourself to the food that is here and anything else you may need. You don't have to be on your best behavior, but you will need to clean up after yourself and help with the chores. We're all working together to make this world a nice place to live.

In your own words, write a letter of welcome to your child.

Exercise 13.2: Homemaking

As you settle in to making this earth your home, you can brainstorm ideas that would help. Imagine you are a being from outer space who has come to earth. You've decided to stay, and you want to form a comfortable attachment to your new community. You need to learn your way around, become familiar with your surroundings and the other inhabitants, learn the language and its nuances and idioms, make friends, and so on. You might begin by doing the following:

- Find out the names of the plants and animals that live around you.
- Take your time walking around local neighborhoods. Talk with your neighbors, store clerks, waiters, a traffic officer, or someone waiting for a bus. Introduce yourself and find out their names.
- Find a place to volunteer some time to better your community.
- Familiarize yourself with your city council and the issues that are currently being addressed.
- Become involved in a local agency or event.
- Read the local newspaper. Watch local TV news and specials.
- Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper, expressing your views on a topic that is important to you.
- Make sure you are registered to vote and participate in elections.
- Choose an environmental issue and find a way to help.
- Talk with a lot of people, especially those who are different from you. Listen carefully as they talk, and try to understand their viewpoints. Get to know your neighbors.
- Go to community events, especially those that involve local residents. Enjoy local celebrations and festivals.

Accepting the World as It Is

I never learned to live in the world as it is. I always wanted to live in a better world than the one that we're all faced with.

Fundamentalism promised that to me. It promised a better world if only I would give up myself and give up being a real human being. Then I could have things that most people only dream about.

— Peter

The world is a mixture of many things, full of good and bad and everything in between. Life has complexity and ambiguity. Recovering fundamentalists usually need to work on letting go of fearing the world and ordinary life, releasing their superior posture of disdain for the world, and dealing with empty feelings of boredom and dissatisfaction.

Letting Go of Fear

Many religious groups have a very broad definition of “bad.” It can extend to every domain of life, including money, sex, forms of entertainment, and other philosophies. Conservative Christians have been known to condemn meditation, guided imagery, relaxation techniques, massage, values clarification, sex education, critical thinking, motivational training, self-esteem enhancement, dancing, movies, and mixed bathing. It seems that the major categories for suspicion are freethinking and fun!

Exaggerated images are used by fundamentalists to engender a fear of falling away from God. One small slip is portrayed as the beginning of a rapid slide into a life of sin: Playing bingo can lead to compulsive gambling. A single drink can make you an alcoholic. A slow dance can arouse your animal drives and lead to sexual depravity. One marijuana cigarette can lead to heroin addiction.

Fear can also stem from stopping or changing the devotional habits you once had. You were probably programmed to believe that it was necessary to be faithful about church attendance, Bible reading, witnessing, and prayer in order to stay on the straight and narrow. To “pray without ceasing” meant keeping Satan at bay. Thus you might feel afraid if you no longer do these things.

Depending on the extent of your fear training, warning bells could go off in your head for any number of reasons. You could, for example, be sitting in a smoky bar listening to a great jazz band and suddenly think “How would you feel if Jesus came back right now and found you here?” (This is a common question used to induce guilt and keep believers in line.) At those moments, you can stop and recognize the thought as an old message, one that has become idea monster talk. You can reassure your child and affirm the way you see reality now: “I am enjoying myself very much right now, and that is a good thing. In fact, Jesus might also enjoy this band.”

To live fully now, you need to reject this notion that the world is a dangerous, evil place. *Your life does not need to feel like a high-wire act.* As you find the courage to experience the world with an open mind, you will find much that is safe, supportive, and fulfilling. Your adult self can learn to make sound judgments. You can grow in maturity, strength, and inner wisdom. You can learn to protect your inner child from any real dangers. For the most part, you can learn to view life as rich with opportunity. The world is truly full of decent and wonderful things. Ordinary people are amazingly variable, interesting, and rewarding to know.

Releasing Disdain

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

“Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them,” says the Lord, “and touch nothing unclean; and I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6:16–18)

In this evangelical tradition, the big exception to the separation rule expressed in this passage is “witnessing.” You are expected to associate with the heathen in order to bring them into the fold. However, this is always a one-way communication. Born again Christians who believe they have a monopoly on “the truth” feel they have a duty to preach the gospel.

It is never a dialogue; there is no effort to listen or share views with any sense of mutual respect. And there is certainly no desire to learn anything (except perhaps the “weaknesses” of the other's faulty thinking). I remember clearly a sermon I heard once about bringing the people of Denver to Christ. The minister of a very large fundamentalist church told his congregation to avoid any *discussions* with potential converts. He told them not to argue with people, that if someone wasn't interested in the grace of God, they should move on. He said to save the gift of salvation for those who were open, hungry, and thirsty for the truth. The message was obvious: Preach. Don't listen. Assume that if people don't readily accept, it is because they are proud and resisting the word of God. Don't cast pearls before swine. What a convenient explanation for any lack of immediate receptivity.

You also may have had the experience of getting a superior smile and then silence when trying to have an open discussion with a dogmatic Christian. The smugness can be insulting and infuriating. So, not surprisingly, the “hungry and thirsty” who swallow the missionary message tend to be those who are desperate and downtrodden, eager for any answer. As expected, these new believers suspend thinking and find meaning and hope in the promise of salvation and a caring community.

Releasing your disdain for the world will become possible as you rejoin the human race. When you no longer consider yourself one of the chosen elite, there is no need to look down on others. In fact, the human flaws and struggles you see around you might become a valued part of your new sense of shared humanity.

Confronting Dissatisfaction

You may have also acquired the attitude that this life is simply not worth much. No matter what there is to enjoy, no matter what humans accomplish, nothing compares to the spiritual realm of God and heaven.

This attitude puts a gray pall over all of life, which you may experience as a feeling of depression. I myself have certainly battled with the idea of nothing in the world being good enough compared to my former religion.

After the enchantment of helping with a heavenly kingdom, ordinary life can look pretty plain. Since the meaning in life is no longer simply bestowed on you, you have to become more active in creating your life (more about this in the next chapter).

At times this problem of dissatisfaction can become severe to the point of dysfunction. The world can feel incredibly awful, life meaningless, and people just impossible. Disappointment can be devastating and leave you feeling hopeless or panicked.

These overreactions are understandable when you realize that you were taught to think you *needed* life to be ideal. You were probably told that you had a void in your life that only God could fill, because only God could fill it perfectly. The implication was that you *had to have your needs met perfectly*. That is, only Jesus could truly understand you, and you needed to be understood completely. Only God could give you enough purpose in life, and you had to have a grand, compelling purpose.

This is a subtle but very important point, because if you have been convinced that these ideals are necessary, you feel much more anxiety if they are not present. When you feel disappointed, you are more likely to panic about having a bad *life* instead of a bad *day*! For example, if your lover is insensitive, you might despair of anyone loving you the way you need to be loved. I remember feeling panic when I heard the old hymn “No One Ever Cared for Me Like Jesus.” If that’s true, what then? A life of uncaring relationships? That’s a frightening thought.

Thus even though everyone has to come to terms with an imperfect world, as a former religious idealist, you are not starting at the same point as others. Other people can wish for something, feel let down, and more easily say, “It’s okay, and I can deal with it.” For the former fundamentalist, it is first necessary to let go of thinking you need so much. (Actually, this is tremendously liberating because you can then enjoy what you do have.)

The tendency to black-and-white thinking can worsen this problem. The alternative to perfection is not total failure. Not having God’s blueprint for

your life does not mean your life has no meaning. While relationships can be frustrating at times, people do not have to be like Jesus (or, more precisely, your idealized image of Jesus) to be worth knowing and loving. Life, with all its woes, is still pretty wonderful. We don't need perfection to be happy.

There is an important distinction between perfectionism and healthy idealism. An ideal can be a useful image; it can provide direction for organizing one's effort. For example, a couple that holds on to an ideal about an open, trusting relationship is more likely to behave that way. They are more willing to take the time to really talk with each other. However, an ideal is a *vision* of the end of a journey, not a true destination. The journey itself is the meaningful part—what you experience and learn. The vision just keeps you on track.

In contrast, perfectionism focuses on arriving, instead of appreciating the process. Thus small achievements can be lost in the emphasis on reaching perfection. The joy of a beautiful day is lost in needing every day to be beautiful. A great friend or lover is dismissed for having faults. Life is viewed as discouraging and frustrating whenever there are setbacks. And most destructive of all, self-worth takes a beating because of “mistakes” made and personal imperfections.

The alternative to this is to learn how to accept life as it is. There is so much variety, with abundant joys and sorrows. People are imperfect; they always have been and always will be. The relationships we have are necessarily imperfect as well. This can be very hard for the inner child to accept. Your adult needs to appreciate these facts and help your child. Otherwise, nothing may ever truly satisfy. The good that is abundantly available in life can get missed. Each time something isn't perfect, your child may spoil it by having a tantrum. This can be an especially serious issue for you just after leaving your faith.

Several strategies and ideas can help you in struggling with perfectionism. For instance, research in cognitive psychology shows that we cannot

perceive anything without contrast. That is, you can see a black line on a white piece of paper, but not a black line on a black piece of paper. The same is true of all types of perception, thus emotional conditions also require contrast. A good day feels great because some days are not so good. Joy derives meaning from sadness. It is the differences in life that make you notice. You need all of your experiences in order to fully experience the positive ones!

You may also want to reconsider your goals. Perfectionists usually want everything to be perfectly good all the time. You might think life is supposed to be happy all the time. But what if it were enough for life to be vastly complex and interesting? Or you might decide that it is valuable in life to experience depths of feeling, to live through many things, to genuinely *feel* every aspect of your life. These ideas can shift your perspective and help you relax your demands, and, since they are also quite realistic goals, you can also get what you want! It won't be heavenly bliss all the time, but you do get to participate fully in the great drama of humankind.

When Malcolm described his leaving process to me he couldn't help crying as he talked about learning to accept life. For years he had lived in a fantasy world, yearning for a better life in the hereafter and never really connecting with other human beings. He wanted the promises held out by fundamentalism. Oddly, one event that finally helped shake him out of his trance was seeing the Alfred Hitchcock film, *Vertigo*. He wrote the following piece about that experience:

A detective suffering from a fear of heights is assigned to follow a suicidal woman. She leads him into another world, just beyond the reach of the senses. This world is portrayed marvelously.

Then, the woman throws herself off a church tower and dies. The detective, who has fallen in love both with her and with the romantic vision she represents, goes temporarily insane and is hospitalized. After his release he wanders disconsolately from

place to place, imposing the vision of otherworldly perfection she represented on everything he sees, all to no avail.

Finally, he finds an ordinary looking woman (who, unknown to him, is actually the woman he was hired to follow, sans disguise). Gradually, he transforms the second woman into the image of the woman he had loved. But the second woman dies too, in the end, because she is not his dream and never was.

This movie hit me like a sack of bricks. It spoke to something buried deep inside of me. I wanted the vision more than the reality of this universe, which seemed unbelievably dull. I guess what the film meant to me, although I couldn't realize it at the time, was there can't be another reality for me. I would have to live in this world even if it couldn't be the perfect world that I wanted it to be.

After I watched this film, I had a breakdown, I guess you could say, because I woke up from a deep sleep and I felt like my soul was leaving my body or something. And my heart was pounding, and I just felt like I was going to go into a trance and never come back. I had to decide if I was going to stay in this world or not. The world seemed very plain and ordinary and gray. But I decided that even if I couldn't have that other world, this was the world that I wanted.

I don't expect life to be some other life. When I was a fundamentalist, I was always trying to make life and myself different from what it really is. And I can't do that anymore. I accept myself with all my human weaknesses and I accept the world as it is and that's all I can do. From time to time I have emotional experiences that are connected with religious feelings, but never like before. I don't seek them. I don't want to go off into some other world someplace. I know that my place is here. And I just find joy in the ordinary things in life.

Eastern philosophies and religions teach much that is valuable about accepting life as it is. Learning about Taoism or practicing meditation can help you acquire a more accepting and peaceful state of mind (see Appendix for suggested reading). With our Western habits of aggressive and high activity, we have much to learn about sitting still, quieting the mind, and listening to the gentler patterns of life.

The notion of acceptance is a profound and complex subject that cannot be covered completely here. I encourage you to seek out and consult other resources. In general, the main benefit of learning to accept is liberation. You feel liberated when you accept a situation and “go with the flow.” You enjoy people when you accept who they are and stop trying to provoke change. Life can be sweet when you embrace it for what it is.

Exercise 13.3: New Responses

Acknowledging your feelings and judgments can go a long way toward diffusing them. One way of doing this in a concrete way is to keep a log of any thoughts you have of fear, disdain, and perfectionism. Writing them down will keep them from becoming exaggerated and overpowering. You can then consciously talk to your child and actually “reprogram” your thinking. For each occasion, write down a new, more life-affirming response to the situation. Over time, this practice will begin to change your reactions to life experiences.

Finding Pleasure

Did you ever fly a kite in bed?
Did you ever walk with ten cats on your head?
If you never did, you should.
These things are fun and fun is good...
Today is gone. Today was fun.
Tomorrow is another one.
Every day, from here to there,
Funny things are everywhere.

— Dr. Seuss *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

If you were part of a religious group that determined much of your behavior, you may now need to clarify what gives you pleasure and meaning in life.

You may also find that you have guilt feelings about exploring new possibilities. This is natural and you can examine your monster talk while supporting your child. For Stacy, a major part of healing from her religion was learning to trust her ability to enjoy life:

It used to be that my first thought was always “What will the church think of this?” When I got dressed it was “Is this okay to wear?” It wears you out. Everything is about what everyone else is thinking instead of “What do I want to do? What is fun?” I wanted a safe place to explore.

I'm glad I'm not thinking that way now, but sometimes it's scary. Some things I do are fun, but I'm not sure if it is okay with God. I think so, but I am not sure. I don't think I'm doing terrible sinful things.

If this is your home and Earth is a good place, then perhaps it's okay to relax and have some fun! Maybe life is not meant to be a struggle, full of suffering and tears. While each of us must face hard times, our approach to them can make all the difference. Some people make a big issue out of every detail; others are able to live with more ease. Religion tends to teach that life is serious and hard work. Cara found this habit of thought hard to break:

I have trouble enjoying life unless I've just done something hard or unpleasant. Then I allow myself a short time of relaxation and enjoyment. When I'm not extremely busy and productive, I feel worthless. I have to earn my right to be on this earth.

Your inner child can be of immense help in your learning to enjoy life. Children know how to be in the present and how to have fun. Much

suffering comes when we regret things in the past or worry about the future. Yet, if we choose to notice, there are incredible riches in everyday life. A child will be fascinated by an ant carrying a huge load or the formations of clouds. A fireworks display is pure ecstasy. As you become better acquainted with your inner child, you learn more about how to enjoy life.

It is important to realize that fun is an important matter. Children who do not have any fun are not happy and are eventually not healthy. The same is true for adults, since your inner child is your core. Forms of enjoyment may differ for children and adults, but we all need our “serum fun level,” as I heard one doctor put it. Research has connected relaxation with physical health.

A more relaxed lifestyle is also a more natural state. The eight-plus hour workday is a fairly recent human invention—one that hasn't caught on in the animal world at all. Even such fabled workers as bees and ants spend only about 20 percent of their day laboring. Hummingbirds spend 80 percent of their time sitting on twigs. Lions can lie in the same spot without budging for twelve hours at a stretch. And anyone who's ever lived with one knows how little time housecats spend with their eyes open.

For humans, modern life has created a fast pace for nearly everyone. It seems that if we want a calmer and more playful lifestyle, we have to make a conscious choice to live differently. If you want to make such a change, keep the following points in mind. (Since these are not such big issues for children, your child can help you here.)

- Don't worry about other people's opinions. For example, if you want to start wearing a lot of big hats, who cares what your neighbor thinks?
- Not everything is worth doing well. That is, you can have a lot of fun doing something badly or very infrequently. For instance go bowling about once every two years. I'm terrible at it, but it's fun so I see no reason not to do it.

- It's okay to do things that do not seem appropriate for your age, like climbing trees. In fact, it can be very liberating.
- Observe what other people do for fun and borrow their ideas.
- Play with children.
- Experiment! Be brave and try something. If you don't like it, move on to something else.
- Be open to a range of intensity—to feelings of pleasantness, serenity, joy, interest, fascination, excitement, thrill, and surprise, even shock. Many things are inherently interesting. The absurd and weird can also enhance your life!
- Make fun a *priority*, not a luxury. If you are “too busy” then rethink your schedule and make room.

Exercise 13.4: Childlike Fun

Close your eyes and invite your inner child to be with you. Tell your child that you want to create more fun in your life. Explain that you recognize this as a need and that you want your child to be happy.

Then invite your inner child to help you think of ideas for having more fun. Spend some time brainstorming the following categories.

- Fun things that you enjoyed when you were little.
- Places you've wanted to visit.
- Books you'd like to read.
- Friends you'd like to see or talk to on the phone.
- New people you'd like to have as friends.
- Movies, plays, concerts.
- A new “toy”.
- Enjoyable activities around the house, such as gardening, redecorating, gourmet cooking.

- More and different sports activities.
- More creative sex.
- Arts and crafts.
- A class in something that interests you.
- New restaurants.
- New projects at work.
- Little things like sitting on the porch with a cup of tea, taking a bubble bath, rolling down a hill of grass, walking to work or the store, doing a jigsaw puzzle.

Have fun making a huge list without censoring anything. Include things that are completely new to you and things that seem impractical or even impossible. For example, maybe you can't afford to go on a cruise, but if you put it down, you are more likely to notice a bargain opportunity. And take some chances! While you may not consider yourself an artist, you can still have a ball in a painting class. This is your life and you deserve to enjoy it.

Then take a few items from your big list and put them on your calendar. Make plans for following through on each of them. And when you have, check them off. Let yourself have the feeling of accomplishment. You are growing and changing in a very important way, redefining your goals and purposes. When you consider all the little fun things that are possible, you can easily include at least one every day.

Responsibility for Pleasure

It's important to remember that enjoyment of life depends on inner experience, not external things. You can have plenty of money, a great job, people that love you, lots of fun events, and still be dissatisfied, because happiness is created within. External circumstances can contribute, but we are responsible for how we experience them. You can enjoy a meal or wolf it down. You can cherish an hour with your child, or look at your watch

while attempting to play. Even the circus is no fun if you are in a sour mood.

This issue of responsibility is central. If you believe that someone or something outside yourself is responsible for your happiness, you can never be satisfied. It won't work to replace God and religion with new pleasures if you expect the stimulation itself to be enough. In fact, I believe that the fundamentalist criticism of "things of this world" stems from this passive approach to pleasure. Taken at face value, nothing can possibly be good enough.

In recent years, I have noticed a strange phenomenon when spending leisure time with devout Christians. It seems no matter what we choose to do together—a terrific meal, time with kids, or an amusement park—it isn't quite enough! There is a vague sense of disappointment. We try to find a faster roller coaster because thrills are from outside. What a sad illusion! It's no wonder "this world" is denigrated. Even the most secular person will usually agree that pure hedonism is a desperate lifestyle.

As Jesus said "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you" (Luke 17:1). That is, you create the quality of your own experience. You can be bored in the most exciting situation or you can be thrilled with a simple pleasure. If you believe that you have a rich life-source within you, then you can always draw upon it, bringing that spirit of joy and creativity to any experience!

Humor

Many people today recognize the importance of humor for healing and for enjoying life. Laughing often seems to help because it reflects an acceptance of our limitations. When things go awry in some way, when you don't have total control of events, with some humor, you can actually take pleasure in the surprise. If you have a need to stay in complete control at all times, everything is deadly serious. For example, think about someone jumping into the ocean and losing his bathing suit. He's out in the water, stark naked, while his suit washes up on shore in front of some other people. This predicament seems funny. Why? It was unexpected, out of the

ordinary, out of control, and yet certainly not the end of the world. Hopefully, this swimmer will be able to laugh at his predicament.

The amount of humor you have in your life really depends on how you judge your circumstances, from missing an off-ramp on the freeway because you were looking at an attractive driver in the next car to having a fire in your house a week *after* you quit smoking in bed. You could fume or cry, but laughing about it is often more useful. Much of life is simply not controllable, and the effort to master the world can be depressing and exhausting. Appreciating what is funny can help a lot.

The humorless person does not accept absurdity. Life is defined as serious and rational, requiring a constant vigilance. This is usually the case for fundamentalist Christians. The entire world is viewed in terms of God's master plan and he is always supposed to be in control. There is no place for silliness. Titus 2:11–13 says:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men,
training us to renounce religion and worldly passions, and to live
sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed
hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior
Jesus Christ.

Moreover, religious zealots aspire to rise above this life and become more god-like. Human frailty is not acceptable. People are considered sinful, not merely weak, so the very notion of human absurdity does not fit. It would be too forgiving.

Having a sense of humor usually reflects a general feeling of safety about life. Instead of living with constant judgment, the person with humor assumes that it is okay to make mistakes. Other people make mistakes too, and that makes us all pretty funny. What a wonderful and relaxing experience to have some humor about our frailties! Perhaps we can all love ourselves more and love each other better as we share the relief of more laughter.

When you are healing from religious indoctrination, humor can be especially helpful. Many Bible teachings and stories are funny in an absurd kind of way. As you overcome your phobia about blasphemy, you can take a more lighthearted look at them and thereby lessen their controlling impact. For example, remember Elisha's wrath over being teased for his baldness? Or how about God flooding the earth and wrecking his own creation like a little boy smashing a spoiled model airplane? Or even Jesus making a lesson out of a barren fig tree—when it was out of season anyway? Many points of fundamentalist theology are equally illogical and funny. I once wrote a list of “Top Ten Bizarre Verses from the Bible,” and found it to be a relief. Sonya was a member of the Religion Recovery Group who appreciated the laughter shared as part of the healing process.

I hadn't taken the time to look at and kind of laugh at some of the stuff that has affected me. Laugh in a sad way, sometimes, but still laugh, like “this is ridiculous.” And that helped me a lot. To be able to just lighten it up—I think that's important. I believe in laughter as a healing process, and once you learn to laugh, it seems like you can heal. I use that in my life, you know. If I'm really stressed out, I exaggerate it further, to the point where I can laugh at it. And then I can handle it better.

Exercise 13.5: Taking Stock

Learning to enjoy life more is an important part of recovery as well as great fun. Another strategy for increasing your pleasure quotient is to simply notice and appreciate more. You can do this by keeping track of what happens and learning to cherish your favorite things.

In your notebook, every evening make notes about the three things you most enjoyed that day. At the end of the week, write down the three favorite experiences of your week. Do the same at the end of each month. Soon you will notice how much you can appreciate the positives in your life. Mark, the father in a family of five, came up with the following notes:

Daily highlights:

Friday:

- Playing a game of slam dunk the tennis ball with my toddler, using the basket on his stroller.
- Exploring a new route home from work, through the woods instead of on the freeway. More relaxed, leisurely.
- A visit to the bookshop/café; having a fancy coffee. Finding a new book I want to read and a good one for my wife.

Saturday:

- Having some quiet in the morning to read the newspaper. Relaxing. Interesting items. I like keeping up with the events.
- Minor league baseball game. Chatting with new friends. Sampling spicy French fries.

Sunday:

- Four-mile run down to the beach and back, view of the water; a good workout.
- Making love in the afternoon when the kids were out.
- Finally talking to my sister on the phone. It's fun to reconnect.

Highlights for the week:

- Free outdoor concert with a big band. Friendly folks and neighbors. Dancing some swing even though no one else would. Lots of smiling. Tried to get a new step right.
- Making love in the afternoon when the kids were out.
- Having some quiet in the morning to read the newspaper.

Highlights for the month:

- Finding a replacement for the stereo system.
- Seeing my daughter again after six months.

- Having a bonfire, marshmallow roast on the beach. Clear skies, bright stars, a satellite passing by. Some wine. Fun and easy.

A similar approach is, for each of the categories listed below, to write down one or more favorites. This will help you distinguish your preferences more clearly, and thereby intensify your feelings of pleasure. If you do not have any favorites in a particular category, leave it blank for now. Pay some attention over time, gradually identifying more favorites and filling in all the blanks. This is not intended to be judgmental or close off other options. Your choices can change tomorrow. The purpose is to notice and celebrate the details in your life. Have fun! Create other categories if you like.

Color	Kitchen utensil
Fruit	Room in your house
Vegetable	Article of clothing
American dish	Slang word or phrase
Foreign dish	Novel
Time of day	Nature sound
Scientific discovery	Smell
Part of your body	Nonfiction book
Piece of furniture	Houseplant
Childhood memory	Magazine
Season	Comedy movie
Foreign country	Dramatic movie
Foreign movie	Dance company
Play	Board game
Musical	Sport or game
Hobby	TV show
Pastime	Flower
Car	Tree

Junk food	Poem
Cologne	Painting
Beverage	Sculpture
Animal	Insect
Neighbor	Popular song
Friend	Classical music

Exercise 13.6: Adding More Humor to Your Life

Humor is partly an outlook on life which develops over time. You can also be open to new ways of enhancing the amusement in your life. Here are a few ideas:

- Pay attention in the course of your day to quirky, unexpected things that give you a chance to chuckle. Imagine you are a filmmaker and these little details will add interest to a romantic comedy you are writing. For example, your cat chases a bug and runs into the wall, three teenagers on the street wearing outrageous clothing look exactly alike, a woman in a restaurant orders a huge hot fudge sundae and a diet soda, your three-year-old strips off her brand-new bathing suit and jumps into the public swimming pool. The list is endless once you start to notice.
- Read funny books and magazines. Have some light reading by your bed and in the bathroom. Bookstores and libraries are well-stocked with humorous material. Don't skip the comics in the paper. Read the personals, and imagine what your own ad would be like if you included the strangest things about yourself.
- Spend more time with friends and acquaintances who have a sense of humor. Tell them you want more levity in your life. Offer to swap good jokes. If you have good role models for seeing life in a funny way, notice how they react to things.
- Go to funny movies and plays. Watch comedies on television or video.

- Spend time kidding around with your children. Try seeing the world through their eyes. Imagine you are their age and indulge in their kind of humor.
- Collect favorite cartoons and put them up in your house. Make copies for friends. Buy funny postcards for yourself or others.
- Hang up pictures of posters that make you smile. Collect amusing items that you can display, such as sculpture, pillows, toys, funky furniture, or unusual lamps. Loosen up your assumptions about functional or proper items for home furnishing.
- Write in your journal about anything funny, ironic, or absurd that has made you laugh. See if you can find one incident every day. If possible, tell the stories to other people. Listen to the stories they tell in return.
- Write about the funniest and strangest things in your religious experience.

Being Present

I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

— Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

No matter what your hopes are for the future or what has happened in the past, the fact is that you exist now, and can be fully alive *now*. This might be a little frightening, since a religious mindset may have shielded you from many feelings. However, many recovering fundamentalists come to value “waking up.” The following dialogue is from my Religion Recovery Group:

Bob: I spent a lot of my life inside of my mind, thinking about cosmic issues. So now, it takes a lot of my effort, but I try to just be where I am, like sitting in this room. I think, "Okay, there's a mirror there, and there's that heater, and there are these people, and these are their names, and the carpet's rose colored, and the walls are tan." I have all these exercises for just recognizing where I am now and not listening to myself think or observing myself talk.

After a while, after some practice, I can find myself at the end of the day saying, "Hey, I was there all day, wasn't I?" It helps me not feel like time is slipping away from me, because if I'm there all the time, it's not getting by. I've had a part in it.

Janet: I remember always thinking the future would be better. Not just the heavenly future, but in twenty years I wouldn't have a kid in diapers. Always something around the corner that would make my life better. Then, as you become more aware, you learn to appreciate how it feels to nuzzle your six-year-old's neck when he's sitting there on your lap. And you get in bed at night and stretch out, and it feels so good. You have a cuddle with your hubby, and it just feels good. And you learn to just get into those kinds of feelings. Or you're playing the piano, and it just feels right to sit there and enjoy some music. You learn after a while that what you're doing right now is as good as it's going to get right now, so you just appreciate whatever it is.

Terri: I dreamed once that I died and was confronted by this gaunt-looking figure. I asked him something like "All right, so here we are. Do I get to see heaven now? This is heaven?" And he looked at me like I had missed the whole point. He said "Well, that was it. Did you miss something?"

As you pay more attention to your life, you may notice the difference it makes simply *to be present*. Not all of the pleasure of being alive is fun and games. It can be deeply satisfying to generally feel more connected. When you decide that you want to live life now, all of the little things take on more meaning: the taste of fresh coffee, a child's smile, the reflection of sunlight on water, crying at a movie, sweating after a run. It can be like coming out of a trance, noticing all kinds of sensations and feelings. Being in touch with the full range can make you feel more alive—experiencing the disappointments and frustrations more clearly, actually being in your body, and sensing the complexity of being human.

Chapter 14

Thinking for Yourself

I've come to believe that fundamentalism is a heresy. It's a Christian heresy; it is *not* Christianity. I think what the fundamentalists have done is to take an external belief system, which is extremely rationalist, and impose it upon the faith and impose it upon the Scriptures, in particular, and bend everything to fit into it. That's what happens theologically. Spiritually the same thing happens. They take a framework of expectations and personal behavior beliefs and they try to twist everybody to fit those expectations.

— Kevin

Independent thought might simply feel unfamiliar and difficult for you now. Critical thinking is a skill you may not have fully developed since dogmatic religious training does not encourage you to think for yourself. Instead, you receive a package of beliefs (called the truth) to adhere to. For many people, this is a comfortable arrangement. I have seen religious literature that used “All your thinking has been done for you,” as a selling point!

Because of this, you may not feel confident about your ability to think. After all, the thoughts of inept and evil human beings could only be false and foolish.

Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. (Corinthians 3:18–19)

Thinking for yourself can also feel dangerous. Thinking independently was a *sin*, an audacious flaunting of God's authority. (Adam and Eve were ejected from Eden because they ate of the knowledge of good and evil, rather than giving God strict obedience.) Therefore, the religious attitude toward critical

thinking is not merely one of dismissal, but a vehement condemnation of an act seen as rejecting God. To commit this sin of pride is to risk separation from God and eventual damnation. So as you explore new ideas in your life now, it is likely you will experience some real anxiety. Having an open mind feels risky, as the following dialogue from my Religion Recovery Group illustrates.

Susan: I read everything with a backdrop of Christianity. I can't seem to read anything and just take it and say, "That's a nice idea." I'm always comparing it. It's like you can't ever get rid of it.

Cory: For fourteen years I studied Christianity. A couple times a week after that, I'd be doing my groceries, and a little saying would pop into my head. And now I play a game with it and think "Now do I agree with that or not?" to try and break the automaticity of it. But it's definitely there, it's in my head, I studied it for so long! At first it bothered me, and I tried to put it out of my mind, like "don't think of an elephant." And then I tried, when those things popped up, to examine them, "Is that true or isn't it?" Or sometimes I just laugh. Try not to fight it.

Bob: The problem for me is a tendency to turn away from just anything that contradicts what I've been taught. Or to be afraid of anything that contradicts. I automatically get the thought "Maybe this is something I shouldn't do. Maybe I should stay away from this."

Susan: I have that thought and then I keep reading.

In short, to be a loyal believer is to be meek and receptive, don't think for yourself, dismiss any original thoughts and accept that you stray; you are damned and cannot come back. The *process* of careful thinking is discouraged and the *content* of thought must be strictly controlled. This may have deeper implications than you are currently aware of. A brief discussion of the ways thinking "works" will help you better understand.

The Thinking Process

Thinking, learning, and memory are areas of study that date back to Classical Greece. At first in philosophy, and more recently in psychology

and the neurological sciences, scholars have produced a rich body of research and analysis. This knowledge can be useful to you in understanding your indoctrination experience and changing your thinking style.

Classical Conditioning

Originally explored by the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov, this is a powerful learning mechanism that underlies many of our emotional responses. Basically, classical conditioning occurs when events occur together and become emotionally linked. For example, a dog will naturally salivate in the presence of food. In Pavlov's most famous experiment, a dog was shown a piece of meat while, simultaneously, a bell was rung. Over time, the sound of the bell alone triggered the dog's salivation.

This kind of conditioning can explain feelings about certain activities. For example, someone who was made to regularly write out behavioral statements one hundred times as a form of punishment might develop negative feelings about writing. Or someone who almost drowned as a child might associate water with danger. These unconscious reactions can be very strong, outweighing more rational thinking.

In your religious training, many things were strongly associated with either good or evil. As discussed, good was probably associated with obedience, conformity, and so on, and evil with independence and original thought among other things. In a sense, you have been programmed to have gut-level feelings of fear in response to questioning or rejecting your religious training.

An old stimulus can also bring up positive feelings, and these can sometimes be even more confusing. In the Religious Recovery Group, people agreed that it was easy to trigger old responses, especially through music. For example, Bobbie said:

I can still listen to gospel music or a really moving Christian song
and have the feeling just well up inside of me, and the tears will

run down my face. It's like there's still something inside me reaching out wanting something, but I don't know what.

Selective Perception

A great deal of research has been done in psychology and neurology concerning the way humans perceives, process, and store information. Humans do not process all the available information in the environment at one time. Instead, the data is *selected*, and the selection is not random. People notice and process information that is both personally relevant and familiar enough to be understandable. A common example of this *selective perception* is that of overhearing your name spoken. Often, you will not even be aware of hearing conversation until your name was mentioned.

From the perspective of evolution, of course, it makes sense for humans to be able to sort out the information that is important for safety from the massive bombardment of stimulus. But you may recall a more conscious form of selection process in your religious environment whereas testimonials in support of the faith are heard and recorded, stories of failure go noticed. Similarly, reports of success with other belief systems may not be heard. (An area of selection that is always interesting is the convenient use of “scientific evidence.” If it does not serve the fundamentalist belief system, as in the case of evolution, it is disregarded as “of man,” or worse yet, Satanic. But if it supports anything biblical, it is hailed as proof! Examples are the excitement over the shroud of Turin, remnants of Noah’s ark, and radioactivity on top of Mt. Sinai.)

This serves to keep believers safe within one view of the world. And since the strongest motivation in fundamentalism is eternal safety and security, the strength of the selective perception process in those circles is extreme. This also explains why it is difficult for people to leave fundamentalism until they have the personal security to do so. If you sincerely and desperately believe the doctrine as a matter of life and death, your brain will automatically prevent you from processing information to the contrary!

In a real way, selective perception allows you to see what you want to see. You can read the newspaper and unconsciously look for news to support your view of things. People with “chips on their shoulders,” notice slights whenever possible. People who expect to be loved will notice all the positives coming their way—smiles, phone calls, mail, compliments, words of encouragement or interest—all of the same events those with “chips on their shoulders” may experience but don't notice. If you grumble about going to a party because you think it will be boring, you will probably notice and have boring conversations and miss those that are interesting.

Thus you can understand why it can be a struggle to gain control of your mind now. It will take time to learn to think for yourself, accept responsibility for your thoughts, and feel comfortable. At times, old thought patterns might crop up and create fear and confusion. This lapse into a previous group mindset can be triggered by certain stimuli like music, symbols, key words, or phrases and can cause feelings of disorientation. But it is simply the aftereffects of powerful conditioning. It does not mean that “they must be right” or “the Holy Spirit is convicting me.” Rather you are having flashbacks to times that were emotionally laden. As you heal and grow, these will subside and you will be able to put those feelings into perspective.

Exercise 14.1: It's Okay to Think

With your background, it's natural for your Little to feel afraid, confused, guilty, and inadequate when you try to think through any issue for yourself. But your adult self, your Big, can protect your Little. You can work through the four A's of intervention, as described in Chapters 8 and 9. Your monster may well be making statements such as:

“That's not what you've been taught! You can't think that!”

“Watch out! Those are your own ideas. You can't trust yourself!”

“If it's not in the Bible, it can't be right.”

“If you open your mind, anything could come in, including demons.”

“Who do you think you are?”

A preventative strategy is to write down your monster talk statements and then devise a specific adult rebuttal for each of them. For instance, if your monster says, “God doesn’t want you to think,” you might reply with “The God I believe in wants me to act like the intelligent being that I am.”

The Power of Ideas

The way you think affects the way you feel and behave. This applies both in general and in a specific situation. For example, if you consider yourself a talented and qualified individual, you might approach job-hunting with enthusiasm and a high level of activity. Whereas if you think little of yourself, you might feel very anxious and therefore avoid looking for job opportunities. As another example, if you think of yourself as unattractive, you will likely look and behave like someone others will not be interested in, and thus have your beliefs confirmed.

Your ideas also affect your experiences after an event. That is, the way you interpret an event is critical. For example, if a friend passed you on the street without saying hello, you might think that he or she was preoccupied and didn't see you, so you'd let it go without a second thought. On the other hand, you might think “Oh no—He doesn't like me! I wonder why? Then you might feel bad and shrink from future contact with this person.

Given that perceptions and experiences are filtered through our assumptions to produce feelings and behavioral responses, it is clear that your religious beliefs would have a big impact on the way you feel and behave. Many of the beliefs you were taught were life encompassing, even some of those that were only implied and thus have an unconscious impact. For example, if you have the underlying assumption that you are bad, developing the self-love and trust you need to direct your life may be hard.

As part of your recovery then, it is important to examine your assumptions and analyze the degree of influence they have had on your thinking. In addition, you will need to gradually replace these old, dysfunctional beliefs. You need decide to actively provide for your inner child in this way. As you

review and reject some of your old ideas, your adult will can fill in the void so that you have functional assumptions with which to operate. That is, you still need guiding ideas for leading your life, but these do not have to be another rigid set of beliefs. They can reasonable and changeable guidelines. The following exercise is designed to help you become aware of your old ideas and make some conscious choices about new ones.

Exercise 14.2: Belief Reconstruction

In this exercise you will complete ten statements that represent your basic assumptions about yourself and your life. First you will clarify the old assumptions you had while you were within your religion. Then you will replace the old assumptions with new statements about what you believe now.

For each sentence “stem,” begin by writing down the belief that you used to hold. Then beside it, describe the feelings and behavior that resulted from that belief. On the next line, complete the sentence again, this time expressing your present belief, even if you don't feel completely convinced of it just yet. (These are simply working assumptions you can use to guide your life. They might not feel true on a gut level because they because they are not yet familiar.) Finally, beside each new belief, write down the feelings and behavior that are likely to result from that assumption.

You may also notice that some of these items are difficult to respond to in a new way. The important thing is to provide your inner child with the best wisdom you have, the same way a wise parent shares life knowledge. Rather than simply destroying old beliefs and leaving a vacuum, you give your child new ideas to trust so that he or she doesn't feel confused and abandoned. As you grow and develop, these ideas will evolve. (The exercise that follows, “Opening Your Mind,” can help you develop new ideas, if you are having trouble).

Be patient, and realize that it will require effort for your adult to provide this for your child. You can feel good about taking this step of self-responsibility.

Belief Statements

1. I am...
2. Life is...
3. The world is...
4. Other people are...
5. My feelings are...
6. The future is...
7. The present is...
8. My purpose in life is...
9. My biggest hope is...
10. My greatest fear is...

As an example, here is the way Deborah completed the beginning of this exercise:

Belief Statements	Feelings and Behavior
<i>1. (Old) I am only valid as a part of God -- nothing without Him.</i>	<i>No sense of individuality -- I don't know what my own thoughts and feelings are.</i>
<i>1. (New) I am a valuable individual, unique and creative and lovable.</i>	<i>I feel okay about my own thoughts and feelings. More relaxed; it's all right to just be me.</i>
<i>2. (Old) Life is learning to be more Christlike.</i>	<i>Guilt with failure. Pressure to be perfect. Emphasis on doing things right.</i>
<i>2. (New) Life is an adventure with limitless possibilities.</i>	<i>Acceptance of myself. Mistakes are a learning experience.</i>

3. (Old) The world is sinful and fallen and needs redemption.	<i>I don't trust the world. I am fearful of being swayed by anything "out there" that might taint me and be of Satan since this world is his playground.</i>
3. (New) The world is basically a good place to live and can be trusted to support me.	<i>I don't always see bad around the corner. This lets me relax and let good experiences happen to me.</i>
4. (Old) Other people are weak and need my help.	<i>Tremendous feelings of responsibility. I always put others first and there's nothing left.</i>
4. (New) Other people are free to learn, make their own choices, and find their own power.	<i>A weight is lifted. I can accept others and encourage them to find strength within themselves.</i>
5. (Old) My feelings are unjustified.	<i>Guilt; burying them and trying not to acknowledge them.</i>
5. (New) My feelings are justified and important.	<i>Joy and self-love. Examining feelings and listening to what they are trying to tell me. More sharing and deeper relationships.</i>
6. (Old) The future is doing God's will.	<i>Anxiety at not knowing God's will. Fear that precious moments and days are passing me by. No point in making plans or having goals.</i>
6. (New) The future is anything I want it to be.	<i>Joy and anticipation. Realistic fantasy of the possibilities. Setting goals and courses of action to achieve what I want.</i>

Exercise 14.3: Opening Your Mind

Like the members of the religion recovery group quoted earlier in this chapter, you may find that you still struggle against old, dogmatic ways of thinking. Developing critical thinking skills can help in this struggle. One way to do this is to dissect old concepts and examine their component attributes. This is essentially a strategy of inductive thinking, in which reasoning moves from the specific to the general. Raw data is organized to generate categories and concepts that help provide understanding. The result is a strengthening and broadening of your thinking.

Say you wanted to examine some key questions for which you once had hard and fast answers. Take the question “How can I have a satisfying life?” as an example. your dogmatic answer was probably something like “By being a good Christian.” That answer likely no longer works for you, but the question remains.

Begin by taking the question apart. “Life” is a broad concept, composed of many different components or domains: family, work, play, friends, physical well-being, spirituality, and so on. “Satisfying” means different things to different people. A Buddhist will define satisfaction entirely differently than will a yuppie, but both of their points of view are worth exploring. Organized on a grid, the question then might look like the grid titled “Methods of Life Satisfaction.”

To fill in this grid, you would need to temporarily adopt the point of view of each category of person. (You might also need to do some reading or other research to find out how such a person might approach each of the life domains.) In doing this, you might also discover values and beliefs that make sense to you or become more consciously aware of those you already hold. Some viewpoints will inevitably be less comfortable than others, either because you disagree with them or because they are simply unfamiliar. In either case, it is important to keep in mind that thinking about something is not the same as believing it or acting upon it. Thoughts are not dangerous in

and of themselves. Simply note these areas of discomfort and relax; they cannot hurt you.

Methods of Life Satisfaction

Life Domain	Christians	Buddhists	Political Activists	Hedonists	Yuppies
Family life					
Work/ career					
Play/ leisure					
Physical well-being					
Spiritual life					
Friends/ social life					
Community/ political involvement					

As an exercise, take the topic of religion (or another topic that interests you) and analyze how different faiths approach its various aspects: the deity's (or deities') characteristics, prayer, afterlife, and so on. The grid would look something like this:

Components of Religious Systems

Domain	Fundamentalism	Judaism	Islam	Buddhism	Secular Humanism
Deity					
Prayer					
Scripture					
Afterlife					
Enlightenment					
Prophet/leader					
Historical roots					
Human purpose					

Other opportunities for opening out your thinking patterns are all around you. Visit your local library or bookstore and make a point of browsing the sections you normally avoid or neglect. Open books at random and read passages. If something catches your interest, take the book home and read it. If something “instinctively” offends you, you might want to read that too—new ideas often take some getting used to.

The same approach can be used in conversing with other people, choosing movies to watch, and deciding where to spend your vacation.

Try talking to people with different social, cultural, or economic backgrounds from your own. Watch foreign films or ones that concern different American subcultures. Consider a trip to a large city if you live in a small town, or a rural area if you live in a city. Better yet, visit another country, and maybe even learn some of the language before you go. Almost anything that is unfamiliar will teach you something, and the more information you have, the more wide-ranging your thinking will be. New experiences are challenging—not dangerous.

Many former fundamentalists find it enormously helpful to begin reading more widely. The Appendix of this book offers suggestions that are directly relevant to recovery, personal growth, and alternative views on religion. More broadly, you would do well to consider bodies of literature that can broaden your understanding, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy. You may want to read feminist literature or cross-cultural writings. Exposing yourself to new ideals can also be done by taking classes, attending lectures, going to art shows, or watching TV specials, such as Bill Moyers' interviews with Joseph Campbell or his program "World of Ideas." If there is a subject you feel you know a little about, you can read or explore it specifically. For example, you could learn about the evidence for evolution and visit archaeological sites such as Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. If you are puzzled by homophobia, read the news reports on biological origins, watch the movie "Torch Song Trilogy," and read the novel *Kiss of the Spider Women*, by Manuel Puig.

Basically, you need to take over responsibility for the information you have. If your reading has been censored or limited to Christian books, you will have serious gaps in your knowledge. Like a caring adult who wants a good education for his or her child, you can now go about getting it. This can be a very enjoyable exploration! Just be sure to approach the process with a childlike curiosity. Remember that the world as we experience it is not master, it would be a mistake to search anxiously for new answers. As Joseph Campbell said, "Life is not a problem to be solved; it is a mystery to be lived" (Cousineau and Brown, 1990).

Exercise 14.4: Daily Thoughts

In addition to having more data, you need to learn to trust your own ability to process the data, to draw your own conclusions. You are an intelligent being, worthy of your own respect. This exercise will give you a strong sense of the inner wisdom you possess. Get yourself a new, blank notebook that will be dedicated to this exercise. Then each day, take a few minutes to write a "thought for the day." Make it just a paragraph long, keeping it simple and true to what you believe.

This is like a book of daily meditations you might buy, only these are your ideas. Write them in the second person (to “you”), and keep them general enough to be useful to others. In other words, you are the guru , writing down the knowledge you have about life.

Any topic is fair game; write about anything that comes to you. One way to get going is to imagine imparting all that you know to a child or someone else who can benefit from the lessons you have learned about life. Sample topics are love, friendship, jealousy, ambition, giving, planning ahead, goals, forgiveness, physical health, sexuality, possessions, parenting, relating to parents, happiness, fun, relaxation, community, and so forth. Here is one I wrote on uncertainty:

Uncertainty only means that outcomes are unknown at the present time. There could be delightful surprises. If there are challenges or difficulties, it is very likely that you will rise to the occasion.

Consider a small child who has not learned to be afraid. She is uncertain, yes—about what her day has in store, where Mommy might take her when she goes on errands, what is for dinner. But she is eager and smiling. Her eyes are wide, her hands are open, she is ready to receive, or even grab, the day's experiences.

Uncertainty also means possibility.

Another piece is from Sarah, a religion recovery group member, on relationships:

If you value relationships and the uniqueness of people, reach out to them. Let them know who you are. Then try to let loose and let them do with it what they will. Feel good that you have reached out and created an opportunity. You have done all you can. It is up to them to accept the gift. They may not need the kind of gift you offer.

Try to write a short piece every day, for as long as you like, but for at least two weeks. Over time, you will gain a new respect for your own thinking. You will realize how much you already know. You have a rich inner resource

of wisdom. This confidence is a potent weapon against your idea monster when you are criticized for trusting your own thinking. You have a capable adult that can take good care of your child.

Use the following spaces to get you started:

Topic:

Topic:

Topic:

Topic:

Topic:

Chapter 15

Choosing and Creating

I had no control over my life because I had to beg and plead with God to meet my needs and take care of me. I blamed the devil when things went wrong, so I wasn't responsible. It was either God or the devil running my life. And that's a terrible way to live. How can you possibly have high self-esteem when you feel like you don't have any control over your own life?

— Sally

Personal responsibility is a profound concept. People have struggled with it philosophically and personally for centuries. As challenging as life is, it can be difficult to accept the reality that you are in charge of yourself and discomfiting to realize that you *create* most of the consequences that you experience. How much easier to turn everything over to God and hold him responsible. How much easier to blame other people. There are many forms of this kind of dependency.

Yet the cost can prove enormous, as you may realize. You lose much freedom and power when you turn over responsibility. In contrast, taking the reins of your own life can give you the opportunity to create, to design your own course.

Doing so, however, has three prerequisites:

- *Awareness.* People who struggle with "co-dependency" are usually searching for an adult to take care of their child. You need to find and develop your own adult. You need awareness of your child's feelings and needs. You need awareness of how to advocate for your child.
- *Willingness.* You need to be willing to let go of your dependency on your religion. Instead of seeking God's help all the time, you must be willing to discover and develop your own abilities. You need to accept the invitation to love and care for yourself.

- *Work.* The learning process takes time. Sophisticated skills are required, and they take time to master.

The premise of this chapter is that it is both your right and your responsibility to make your own life decisions. While you do not have absolute control over all the conditions of your life, you do have the creative power to design the life you want to a large extent.

Furthermore, you can learn to direct your own life with more awareness and skill. You can develop skills in areas such as critical thinking, values clarification, and life planning. Humans are amazing creatures. They have remarkable intuitive knowledge about what is good for them. A few exercises are presented in this chapter to give you an idea of things you can begin to work on. Other resources can offer you more extensive practice in areas of need that you identify.

Discovering Choice

Looking outside you for guidance may be a long-standing habit. You might even unconsciously expect signals to guide you and golden opportunities to present themselves. It is understandable if you want guarantees instead of risks, and you want clear choices despite the uncertainty and ambiguity of life. For instance, Erin found that after having depended on her religion for so long, she still has a tendency to look for external ways to define values and make decisions. She found that she needs to get to know herself better to figure out what she wants:

Very recently I realized that I'm still giving my power away. I still want somebody to tell me what is going to happen in my life. Before it was God: "God, tell me what you want me to do." Now, it's a psychic. But why should I go to an astrologer or psychic? I mean, if they can do it, I can do it. If they have that power in them, then I can develop that power in me to guide my own life. It's still a real struggle to take responsibility in making what I want in my life happen. The wall I'm up against now is that I don't know what I want.

The Issue of Responsibility

To effectively direct your own life, you need to be able to make decisions about what you want, to plan ahead, and to take action. You need to actively *choose and create* your life. This requires feeling free and empowered. And this becomes possible when your adult takes responsibility for your child.

Part of this responsibility involves taking steps for personal change, rather than “spiritualizing” issues. Mary remembers a church experience that was frustrating because responsibility was being avoided:

I went to a women's retreat and was soon ready to leave. There was a faction that wanted to talk about their feelings. The topic for this weekend was “intimacy,” and there were people that wanted to talk about it. But whenever anyone brought up a problem, all the women would go put their hands on her and pray and hope to heal her that way. I saw a real split between those that wanted to deal with their problem and talk about it and those that believed they could be helped only through prayer.

You may remember hearing a negative opinion expressed about liberal Christians who said, “God helps those who help themselves.” I recall being taught that such an attitude was arrogant and unscriptural; helping yourself doubted God. Thus it is probably very different now to think about taking charge in your life.

Another common pattern for the fundamentalist is to become over responsible to work very hard and feel terrible for any imperfect behavior. The church teaching is that you *choose* to let God work through you or not. Therefore if you make a mistake, *you* must have chosen to be out of God's will. The over responsible Christian can be extreme about evangelism, imposing on others because of fear for their souls and thinking they have a duty to warn. This can be very inappropriate and alienate others. Over responsible believers also take it upon themselves to defend God in public arenas, sometimes going to great lengths to impose their moral standards.

Fred was a former fundamentalist and friend who told me about feeling very angry with a Christian doctor who overstepped his bounds. Fred had had surgery on his cancer and knew he had limited time to live. The doctor visited him in his hospital room and asked him whether he had attended church recently. Fred said no. Later, the doctor returned and asked Fred if he read Scripture. When Fred said no, he replied “You should, you know,” and implied Fred should get ready to “meet his Maker.” The next day, the doctor apologized, but Fred had come to question his professional competence. The fact was that before Fred died, he told me he felt very peaceful, and ready to go. He was pleasantly surprised to realize he had no desire to revert back to his childhood religion.

Another version of over responsibility (in many “new age” philosophies) says that you determine every detail of what happens to you. For example, you chose your parents, you wanted to be in a car accident, and so forth. All of life is seen as a series of chosen learning experiences. This approach can become problematic with too much emphasis on control, resulting in guilt and frustration.

In the approach taken here, people are considered responsible for how they *experience* their lives. Many decisions and circumstances are, at least partially, under your control. Many are not, but you can think ahead and foresee consequences and therefore make the choices that are in your best interests. And in those situations where you cannot control actual events or other people, you can nevertheless determine your own reaction. Your thoughts and feelings are your own, and you can have an important influence on your own internal experience. For example, you may lose your leg in an accident (which you could not control), but you have some say in how you respond to the crisis.

This subject of human responsibility is vast and questions of “free will” can be subtle, especially when it comes to conditional responses. (Space does not permit a full analysis of the issues in this book.) However, an important fact is that you do have the uniquely human ability to reflect on your feelings. This gives you immense opportunity and power for choice.

In general, you can enhance your control over your experience in two basic ways:

- By fully *accepting and receiving* the many good things in your life.
- By actively *choosing and creating* the events of your life.

In Oriental terms, these are the “yin” (receptive) and “yang” (active) aspects of existence. In both of these areas, you can greatly influence your experience by how you choose to think and feel.

Accepting and Receiving

There is a real art in taking in a beautiful landscape or experiencing a work of art or music. Life is full of gifts to be enjoyed. The last chapter addressed the issue of accepting the world, as it is in order to appreciate what it has to offer. As you let go of your interest in the afterlife and decide to be here now, you can stop judging the world and notice countless good things. You can develop more skill in being aware of those positive elements that are already in your life and learn to enjoy them more deeply. These elements can range from really tasting a good meal to fully appreciating long-term friendships.

This art of *receiving* is unlike the passive religious approach to experience, because you actively respond with your thoughts and feelings. By involving yourself and interacting with a stimulus, you give it meaning, much like viewing an optical illusion or hologram—you only see coherence if you actively allow yourself to do so. It is important to remember that it is you that brings meaning to external events in the world.

Choosing and Creating

There are many ways to consciously act on your life. You have the power to make hundreds of choices daily. It may seem like a heretical thought, but God is not the only creator. Part of your personal power will be to grasp the tremendous amount of choice that you have: your career, your pastimes, your partners, your home, your clothes, and your travel, on and on! Will you have egg salad or tuna for lunch? Will you be healthy? You are free.

Most significantly, you can have tremendous personal power in your emotional life by taking responsibility. As you learn to trust yourself to be wise and learn to take care of your inner child, your confidence will grow in your freedom. The “responsibility” will not feel so heavy: it will begin to feel like a privilege. Kat is a former fundamentalist who was delighted to discover that she could create her own experience by choosing her beliefs and attitudes:

Now I've just come to my own personal belief system that I have a creator who loves me and lives within me. Now my life's working. I guess I choose to believe in a creator who created us with ability to create our own life. If I come from a point of scarcity and lack, that's what I have. If I come from a point of abundance and prosperity, believing that there is enough love, there is enough time, there is enough money, then I have enough love, enough time, enough money.

When I was a fundamentalist, there was never enough of anything. We were always begging and pleading with God to provide more. Because we felt that we were nothing and we had nothing, that's what we had—nothing. And of course, the more money you gave, the more God was supposed to prosper you, but that didn't happen to me. Right now, I'm making more money than I've ever had in my life. I have more real, true friends than I've ever had in my life. I certainly feel that I have more love because I love myself more and so I'm attracting people who love me for who I am. The more I take responsibility for my own life, the better my self-esteem.

You will need to grow in the area of self-direction, and this can be a pleasurable process! As you take charge of your life, you need to know how to discover values, set goals, and make your own decisions, even when your idea monster tries to make you feel “self-willed” and therefore sinful.

Exercise 15.1: Values Clarification

Pick ten values from each of the following two lists and then prioritize each of your lists by marking the values from 1 to 10. the first list, Outcome Values, concerns the results that you seek to achieve in your life or the

conditions that you hope to find. The second list, Personal Trait Values, contains adjectives that might describe the person you want to be. Understanding and accepting your values this way can help you set goals more clearly, which is the subject of later exercises.

Outcome Values

<input type="checkbox"/> Advancement	<input type="checkbox"/> Power	<input type="checkbox"/> Nurturance
<input type="checkbox"/> Creativity	<input type="checkbox"/> Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Approval
<input type="checkbox"/> Independence	<input type="checkbox"/> Competence	<input type="checkbox"/> Joy
<input type="checkbox"/> Material comfort	<input type="checkbox"/> Peace of mind	<input type="checkbox"/> Excitement
<input type="checkbox"/> Service to others	<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Privacy
<input type="checkbox"/> Adventure	<input type="checkbox"/> Security	<input type="checkbox"/> Intimacy
<input type="checkbox"/> Duty	<input type="checkbox"/> Popularity	<input type="checkbox"/> Sensuality
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-reliance	<input type="checkbox"/> Respect	<input type="checkbox"/> Friendship
<input type="checkbox"/> Novelty	<input type="checkbox"/> Sensitivity	<input type="checkbox"/> Wisdom
<input type="checkbox"/> Physical health	<input type="checkbox"/> Spirituality	_____

Personal Trait Values

<input type="checkbox"/> Dependable	<input type="checkbox"/> Joyful	<input type="checkbox"/> Productive
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-disciplined	<input type="checkbox"/> Wise	<input type="checkbox"/> Attractive
<input type="checkbox"/> Emotionally stable	<input type="checkbox"/> Content	<input type="checkbox"/> Wealthy
<input type="checkbox"/> Open-minded	<input type="checkbox"/> Unique	<input type="checkbox"/> Personable
<input type="checkbox"/> Honest	<input type="checkbox"/> Courageous	<input type="checkbox"/> Expressive
<input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual	<input type="checkbox"/> Loving	<input type="checkbox"/> Generous
<input type="checkbox"/> Independent	<input type="checkbox"/> Exciting	<input type="checkbox"/> Uninhibited
<input type="checkbox"/> Competent	<input type="checkbox"/> Loyal	<input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive
<input type="checkbox"/> Cheerful	<input type="checkbox"/> Creative	<input type="checkbox"/> Humorous
<input type="checkbox"/> Organized	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Flexible
<input type="checkbox"/> Surprising	<input type="checkbox"/> Sensuous	<input type="checkbox"/> Persistent
<input type="checkbox"/> Inspiring	<input type="checkbox"/> Gentle	_____

Discussion:

Taking the Reins

In learning to take responsibility, it might be easy for you to fall into the trap of trying to make “right” decisions. Most people in our society, religious or not, often think in terms of right and wrong when making decisions—from the extreme of looking for “Mr. Right,” to the idea of making the “right” career choice. And people often experience great anxiety as a result. This fear is based on a view of experience that assumes that the choice itself controls the degree of satisfaction. In fact, however, it is the experiencing of the choice that makes the difference.

As an example, you could agonize over your choice of a restaurant for dinner, trying to choose the “right” one. Then, once you are settled at your table, problems could arise, such as poor service or loud music. You could respond by bemoaning the “incorrectness” of your choice. Or you could enjoy the other attributes of the experience such as excellent food or good companions.

Taking this a step further, we create our lives by *investing* in our choices. For example, if you choose to take a year off from college to get some work experience overseas, that could be a great experience. Or you could continue through school, investing in your studies and making lifelong friends by living on campus. Either way, the decision would be right. Women now often choose between having children early or building a career and starting a family later on. Again, there is no right or wrong, only alternatives. Either path can work if you choose to make it work. There is no wrong decision if it does not violate your sense of morals or ethics.

It can be enormously liberating to stop thinking about decision-making in dualistic terms, and simply realize that you have the capability to make your choices workable and wonderful by how you go about them. If you constantly look over your shoulder with regret, you will sabotage success because you will be withholding the commitment needed to create success. It is far more functional to keep looking forward and asking yourself “What can I do to more fully appreciate my life as it is and what actions can I take to make it even more fulfilling for me?” This is not to say that you won't wonder about “the road not taken.” Of course you are curious about what

another spouse or career could have been like. The answer is that if you'd *invested* in those choices, they would have worked too!

However, you may still be sad that you cannot do everything you might like to do. It is an essential truth about life that every time you make a decision, you also experience a loss of some alternative. I will probably not be able to be an astronaut in this life, and with my interest in space, that's a little sad. But it does not mean I *should* have chosen it as a career. When you buy a chocolate ice cream cone, it means you are not eating strawberry. But you accept the loss in order to enjoy the chocolate. You owe it to yourself to focus on the ice cream you have chosen.

Exercise 15.2: Goal Setting

You have probably heard the phrase “not deciding is deciding.” There is no way not to proceed with your life! So it makes enormous sense to figure out what you want. Otherwise the outcomes of your life will be random and you will certainly not fulfill any dreams.

This exercise presents a method for clarifying the structure of personal goals or desires in your life, ranging from immediate objectives to broad values. Remember that “goals” include all the things that you want to achieve, not just the big achievements. They can be as simple and immediate as “Play checkers with my son,” as involved as “Help develop programs at the boys' club,” or as long-term and complex as “Work on world hunger.”

They can be things that you actively do to get satisfaction, like “spend time with friends” or plans to avoid a problem, such as “stop losing my temper.” Problem-solving is also a goal, such as “getting the car fixed.”

The following grid shows a useful way of approaching this task. It divides your life into various domains to help you think about what you would like to achieve in each of these areas. It also divides your life temporally, since some goals will take more time than others.

Personal Goals							
	Family	Career (Work/ School)	Social	Personal Growth/ Health	Play/ Leisure	Material/ Financial	Other
1-4 weeks							
1-12 months							
1-5 years							

Copy these categories onto paper in a way that will work for you (or used the attached chart), giving ample space for each section. As you list your goals, try to be as thorough as you can while working quickly and spontaneously. Remember that your goals are not “right” or “wrong” and don't need to be consistent or reasonable. The total number of goals written in each category is up to you.

Some of your goals will necessarily be broad, general, or abstract, such as “Get in shape,” “Become successful,” or “Find peace of mind.” With these goals further work will be needed to make them achievable. For example, getting in shape could be broken down into smaller goals: “Lose 25 pounds” and “Get more exercise.” You would then need to plan how to lose the weight—“Get a checkup,” “Start a low-fat diet,” “Daily exercise”—and set a realistic goal in terms of time, say five pounds per month. Similarly, getting exercise could be defined as “Walk for an hour Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. Go to the gym Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday—swim and weights.” In this way, what might seem like overwhelming goals become surmountable.

The ultimate object is to have a list of small steps you can take on a more or less daily basis to accomplish your larger goals. However, it will probably take further thought and research to arrive at those steps. Goal setting is an ongoing process. As you achieve some goals, others will take their place.

Some goals may become less important over time, as your perspective shifts. This inventory can be done repeatedly with interesting results.

In doing this exercise, you may find yourself thinking “I’d like to do x , but y would prevent me from accomplishing it.” Whatever y is for you, it’s important to learn to think of it as a problem to be solved, rather than a barrier to achievement. When you’ve finished listing your goals, ask yourself the following questions. You might want to use your answers as a guide in setting further goals.

1. What was it like to put my goals into words?
2. Do I have many goals? How do I feel about that?
3. How are my goals distributed? That is, how are they spread across time frames and across life domains? What does that indicate about me?
4. Is there anything I would like to change about my goals?

Exercise 15.3: Review and Preview

Once you have defined things you can do on a daily basis to achieve your larger goals, you need to put those steps into practice. This is an exercise in taking one day at a time and exercising the power of choice in your life. Plan to apply this procedure for at least a week to understand the effect.

At the beginning of your day, take ten minutes out to relax, close your eyes, and visualize or preview the coming day. You can actually picture your day as if you were watching a movie—a movie you are directing. You have the power to create the kind of day you want to have. Visualize the key events of the day that you expect, identify your important goals for that day, and see yourself achieving them. Take enough time to move through the entire day, experiencing each part in the way that you choose.

If there is a personal quality that you want to enhance in yourself—such as assertiveness, gentleness, energy, courage, serenity, or joy—allow an image to form that represents this element in you. Give the image dimensions of

color, shape, size, temperature, sound, movement, and texture. Notice where you feel this quality in your body and whether it extends from your body. Then imagine keeping this quality as you go about your day. Slowly picture your entire day. (You might also imagine losing touch with the personal quality you are trying to cultivate. At that point, visualize stopping to center yourself and regaining the quality again.) Finish previewing the rest of the day with success in being the way you want to be.

During the day, you can stop at any time to recapture the effect of this imagery procedure. Simply review the events or re-create the quality you are developing by going through the sensory description again.

Finish your day by reviewing . Mentally, look over what actually happened and compare it with your preview. Pat yourself on the back for what you liked, and learn from what was disappointing. Remember that this is a time for gaining knowledge, not for judgment. If you did not meet your expectations, try to understand why. Be gentle and talk to your inner child about how things can be different tomorrow. Write a summary of how the day went.

In the next day's preview, you can start the process all over again, with the benefit of lessons learned. Remember to focus on one day at a time!

Although simply using visualization is helpful, keeping a structured journal will enhance this exercise by helping you keep track of your daily goals and daily accomplishments.

Monday, March 10

Preview: Plan to stay more relaxed. Don't try to do too much. Just do what I can today and not feel guilty. I imagine a soft, golden ball of relaxation in my belly, humming and radiating out to the rest of my body. When I breathe deeply, it expands and gives me a good feeling. I see myself getting ready for work. I feed myself, shower, and dress without rushing. I have a relaxed day at work, concentrating well. At lunch, I feel pressured to work through, but take some time to feel my golden ball and relaxing. I enjoy what's left of lunch with a friend. I

work the rest of the day, finishing important tasks and feeling okay about those that are unfinished. I go home, prepare dinner, eat with my family. I read the paper while the others clean up and then watch a little TV with my kids. I go to bed and read a book before sleeping.

Review: I did well in the morning, not rushing around as much as usual. I think I still need a little more time, so I will get up a little earlier tomorrow. Work was much more relaxed and I felt fine when I finally got together with Karen at lunch. I enjoyed lunch! Not everything is future reward. The afternoon got a little uptight so I had to stop and relax about 3:00. The golden ball is a very comforting visualization and easy to re-create. The evening was good except that I felt some guilt for not bringing some work home. Need to keep working on that one!

A variation on this exercise that could help you discover long-term goals is to visualize your perfect day. Imagining what you really want is the first step toward making it come true. In her book *Wishcraft* (1979), Barbara Sher provides valuable guidance for making your dreams come true, from fantasizing to concrete planning and achievement. To help clarify what you want, she suggests an exercise of “real daydreaming,” in which you imagine every detail of an average day in your life as you would love it to be. As you see, feel, and experience this day, you write down a sequential, present-tense description of what is happening. Include everything about what you do, where you are, and who is with you. Let your imagination go and forget about any limitations.

The point here is to trust yourself. The desires and intuitions that you have are valid. You have great potential to become the person you want to be and do the things that you want to do.

Many perceived limitations are simply problems and you are capable of developing the skills you need. Whether you want to improve your human relations skills, learn to sail, or study a foreign language, these options are open to you. In the past you may have heard snide remarks about self-

improvement or cautionary words about the dangers of self-esteem. Such thinking serves to prevent personal empowerment. Now you have the privilege of “response-ability”!

A Balancing Note

While aspects of self-determination are very important to well being, it is also wise to remember the other side of the coin. Not everything in life can be planned and directed. You may remember in Chapter 5 a list of strengths from a Christian background, including the capacity to have humility and trust. In order to stay sane, we need to be flexible and accept with graciousness the many things that we do not control—other people, accidents, weather conditions, and even our own reactions at times. Taking responsibility does not mean the same thing as taking total control. Sometimes trying to be self-reliant and self-directing can cause you to become overly individualistic and laden with anxiety.

We are still a part of the universe, interconnected with other people and nature and learning how to play our parts. Life is a dance, not a forced march. We don't control our partners and we don't direct every step. The act of responsibility is to accept the invitation to dance.

Afterword

In a dream I had several years ago, I talked with Jesus. I was disappointed in him and told him so.

“You were supposed to save me,” I said accusingly. “You didn’t do it—you didn't do the job. You're supposed to be a savior.”

He didn't say anything. He just stood there looking like an ordinary man.

I woke up and mused about this notion of “saving.” What did we all want Jesus to save us from—aside from hellfire, that is? From life? Responsibility? I imagined Jesus saying “No, I never intended to save you from all that. That's what you and everyone else wanted. You wanted life to be made easy. I never promised that.”

Epilogue

The journey continues-beyond these pages and these signposts. The word that frequently comes to my mind is *courage*. Anyone can live by a formula. It's much harder to *leave* the straight and narrow. Yet many of us have found that we *must* leave. The imperative from deep within is too strong. Life beckons and to dishonor the call would be spiritual death.

So again I congratulate you for embarking. There are more areas of growth to explore. This book has been a primer, stressing the foundation principles of self-love and trust. As you learn to take care yourself, I invite you to continue exploring in the following areas:

- Rebuild a social support network. Be creative with finding new individuals and groups that share values and interests. Spend time with people that can be supportive to you and encourage you to be who you are.
- Redefine your spirituality if you care to have a spiritual interest in your life. Let your beliefs be chosen instead of inherited or indoctrinated. Allow yourself to consider a wide range of ideas and develop the practices that work best for you. If you remain a church-goer, find a group that respects your right to feel and think for yourself.
- Honor the urge to express you. Being creative is your right; you are not just a creation. Consider the healing influence and life-giving power of art, music, writing, and dance. Discover how you can let your feelings out in a way that brings you pleasure and personal growth. Let it be a part of your life and not subject to external approval. Find out how creative living can take you beyond coping into thriving.

- Carefully assess all of the relationships in your life to see how your religion has affected them. Take responsibility for peace making, conflict resolution, or deepening of connections. When necessary, let go, and let others have their domain of responsibility.
- Continue the process of self-examination and growth, going beyond the issues of religious damage. As you heal your wounds and move on with your life, take the opportunity to learn from all the insights that might arise. Address the needs within you that helped to make your religion problematic.
- Take responsibility for your children. Before sending them off for religious training, think about how you yourself might impart the values and sensibilities that you want them to have. With the information they get, trust them to make their own way, and develop their own spirituality.
- Remember humor! Don't try to make life make sense. You can enjoy the moments when everything comes together and also learn to laugh when it all seems to be a riddle.

I have come to believe that our most basic human task is to take responsibility for us in a deep sense. There are many ways in which we fight and resist the job. Losing ourselves in a safe religion is one way. And there are many other methods for avoiding the naked challenge of being human. Yet the rewards are immense when we move beyond our need for security.

The gardener nurtures and protects the plant and then stands back to allow the explosion of flowering color. You owe it to yourself to blossom, to permit your child full-uninhibited growth. Just remember that taking care of a precious child can be pure delight. And who knows better than a child how to let the spirit soar.

— Marlene Winell

September 30th, 1993

Appendix

Please note that this reading list is from the original publication in 1993, and is therefore limited. An updated list of recommended readings is forthcoming on the Journey Free website, journeyfree.org.

Resources

Included here are resources for information and support. In addition, you may want to investigate therapists, twelve-step programs, and therapy groups in your area.

Further Reading

Leaving Rigid Religion

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon
by Daniel Dennett.

Don't Call Me Brother: A Ringmaster's Escape from the Pentecostal Church
by Austin Miles. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989. Autobiography of former Pentecostal evangelist.

Jesus Doesn't Live Here Anymore
by Skipp Porteous. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991. Autobiography of former minister turned freedom writer.

Jesus Land: A Memoir
by Julia Scheers.

Leaving the Fold: Testimonies of Former Fundamentalists,
by Edward T. Babinski. Thirty-three former Christian fundamentalists explain how and why they first embraced, and later abandoned, that belief system. Of these, eight have become atheists, eight (including Babinski) agnostics, one a Wiccan, and one a Zen Buddhist; the remainder have remained Christian.

***Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist*,
by Dan Barker. Madison, WI: Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., 1992. A dramatic story of de-conversion from ordained fundamentalist evangelist to one of America's leading atheist spokespersons. This book is highly recommended for clear analysis and critique of fundamentalist tenets, including biblical contradictions and doctrinal problems.

Oranges are Not the Only Fruit
by Jeannette Winterson, 1985. "Raised by an oppressively evangelical mother, Jeanette grows up a good little Christian soldier, even going so far as to stitch samplers whose apocalyptic

themes terrify her classmates. As she dryly notes, without self-pity or smugness, "This tendency towards the exotic has brought me many problems, just as it did for William Blake." Jeanette would have remained in the fold but for her unconventional desires; though she can reconcile her love of women with her love of God, the church cannot. It could have been a grim tale, but this is in fact a wry and tender telling of a young girl's triumphantly coming into her own." *Library Journal*.

Through the Narrow Gate: A Memoir of Spiritual Discovery,

by Karen Armstrong. "Cloistered in a psychological as well as a physical sense, Karen Armstrong, a woman of prodigious intellect and talent, a woman who has written seminal books on the subject of religion, goes inside her own personal experience as a cloistered nun in *Through the Narrow Gate*. It's not a particularly pretty picture, this story of her seven years immersed in a life full of bleakness, medical neglect, sexual frustration, and mindless negation of intellect..."

Mental Health and Religion, Recovery from Fundamentalism

Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith & Others Abandon Religion

by Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger. Addresses the how and why of conversion to and away from religious faith.

Combatting Cult Mind Control

by Steve Hassan. Rochester, Vt.: Park St. Press, 1988. Excellent examination of manipulations in religious groups, written by a former Moonie. Readable and applicable in many ways to fundamentalism. Includes recovery suggestions.

"Coming out of the Cults"

by Margaret Singer, *Psychology Today*, January, 1979. Describes emotional problems of former cult members, many of which fit exfundamentalists.

"Counseling Battered Women from Fundamentalist Churches"

by Vicky Whipple. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 13, 1987.

Cults: What Parents Should Know

by Joan Carol Ross and Michael D. Langone. Lyle Stuart Book. Bonita Springs, Fla.: American Family Foundation, 1988. A practical guide to help parents with children in destructive groups.

The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home

by Donald E. Sloat. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1986. Good description of personality differences and religious faith, serious pitfalls in Christian families such as suppression of feelings, fear, self-denial, and perfectionism. This Christian author suggests families pay attention to emotional climate, but stops short of critiquing the religious sources of the problems.

**Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness, and Christian God-Talk*

by Wendell W. Watters. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993. A psychiatrist argues that Christian teachings aggravate and create psychological problems, causing ill health, antisocial behavior, depression, and more. Compelling reading.

Healing Spiritual Abuse and Religious Addiction,

by Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Dennis Linn. Discusses the realities of spiritual abuse and religious addiction, how they are defined, the reasons they exist and how people can move beyond vulnerable life patterns in order to enjoy a more life-giving relationship with God and with a healthy faith.

Letters I Never Wrote

by Ruth E. Van Reken. Oakbrook, Ill.: Darwin Press, 1985. A collection of letters the author imagines writing to her parents and God during her upbringing as a missionary child in Africa and early adulthood. Demonstrates the emotional pain of such a life, but justifies it as lessons from God.

Religion and Mental Health

edited by John F. Schumaker. NY: Oxford University Press, 1992. A collection of essays from the mental health professions, dealing with the connections between religion and psychopathology.

“Religious issues in the psychotherapy of former fundamentalists”

by James D. Moyers, 1990. *Psychotherapy*. 27, 42-45. Recommendations to therapists about understanding the fundamentalist background and its impact on mental health.

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church

by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen. Asserts that churches are meant to be safe places where spiritual leaders help and equip the members for the work of service. There are some churches, however, where leaders use their spiritual authority to control and dominate others, attempting to meet their own needs for importance, power, intimacy or spiritual gratification. Through the subtle use of the right "spiritual" words, church members are manipulated or shamed into certain behaviors or performance that ensnares in legalism, guilt and begrudging service. This is spiritual abuse, and the results can be shattering. Authors VanVonderen and Johnson address these important themes and point the way toward freedom.

Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction

by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton. Nashville: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1991. Addresses many issues of religious addiction but does not really question the core problems of the religion itself.

Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism,

by Robert J. Lifton. New York: Norton, 1961. This frequently cited book provides basic information on mind control.

***The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*

by Eric Hoffer. New York: Harper & Row, 1951. Classic time-tested work examining characteristics of fanatics of all kinds. Hoffer explains powerful motivations for abandoning oneself to a cause.

Understanding Religious Conversion

by Lewis R. Rambo. “Drawing on insights from psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, theology, and missiology, as well as on interviews with converts from disparate backgrounds, Lewis Rambo provides a critique and evaluation of religious conversion throughout the world. He considers various theories of conversion, examines the role of cultural and social

factors in the conversion process, and describes how different religions and disciplines view conversion.”

When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction and Abuse

by Father Leo Booth. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1992. Addresses religiosity as an addiction with patterns and symptoms similar to other addictions. Treatment recommendations include an "intervention" procedure, a family orientation, and guidelines for a twelve-step approach.

Why Some Therapies Don't Work: The Dangers of Transpersonal Psychology

by Albert Ellis. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989. This critique of therapies with a spiritual framework tends to lump them all together, but many of the dangers outlined apply very well to "Christian" counseling.

Critiques of Fundamentalist Christianity & Rigid Religion

2000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People with the Courage to Doubt

Edited by James A. Haught. Prometheus Books, 1996. This book of quotes brings together the words of the “greats” of both East and West, from antiquity to the present. Included are a great number of skeptics and unbelievers among our major inventors, scientists, writers, social reformers, and other world changers, including Epicurus, Voltaire, Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, William Shakespeare, Albert Einstein, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln.

Bible Prophecy: Failure or Fulfillment?

by Tim Callahan. “As the millennium approaches many claim we are living in the end times. Is our world coming to an end as described in the Book of Revelation? By comparing the predictions to actual history, as well as to each other and by noting evidence of historical anachronisms and faulty scholarship on the part of fundamentalist apologists, Callahan subjects the prophecies of the Bible to four rigorous questions: 1) Is the prophecy true, false or too vague to be specifically interpreted? 2) If the prophecy is true was it written before or after the fact? 3) If it was written before the fact, was its fulfillment something that could be predicted based on a logical interpretation of the events of the prophet's day? 4) Was the prophecy directive or deliberately fulfilled by someone with knowledge of the prophecy?”

**The Book Your Church Doesn't Want You to Read*

Edited by Tim C. Leedom. Manoa Valley Publishing, PO Box 5009, Balboa Island, CA 92662, 1993. Enlightening anthology with over 60 writers-renowned theologians, historians, and researchers. Includes important information about church history, the origins of the Bible, and religious practice, aimed at providing a data base for the religiously illiterate. Essays by freethinkers include historical writings from Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, among others. “Consider this book as a kind of consumer protection guide to religion, a big step forward toward religious literacy. Readers will explore myths, origins, fundamentalism, television ministries, the identical stories of Stellar/Pagan/Christian beliefs, unfounded doctrines, child abuse, the Year 200, and women's rights. It's entertaining and readable, with a sense of humor reflecting the absurdities of fundamental religion -- while being inoffensive. The approach is one of not hitting the reader over the head with ‘you're wrong’, but rather ‘consider this’. *The Book Your Church Doesn't Want You To Read* contains many interesting, unknown facts such as there being no mention of Jesus Christ in the Dead Sea Scrolls; the oldest story in the world (predating Christianity by millennia) being that of a virgin mother bearing a newborn baby; God finding out about the Trinity from the Catholic Church in 325 A. D. ; and Christmas being a pagan holiday with December 25th shared as a birthdate by

many other crucified saviors. Contributors include Steve Allen, Dan Barker, Edd Doerr, Robert Eisenman, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Grace Halsell, Gerald Larue, Jordan Maxwell, and Arthur Melville.” –Midwest Book Review.

Chapter and Verse: A Skeptic Revisits Christianity
by Nhke Bryan. New York: Random House, 1991.

Fundamentalism
by James Barr. London: SCM Press, 1977.

The End of Faith
by Sam Harris. In this controversial book, Sam Harris makes the case that faith is the most dangerous element of modern life.

**Fundamentalism: Hazards and Heartbreaks*
by Rod L. Evans and Irwin M. Berent. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1988. Excellent critique of the fundamentalist view of the Bible as infallible. Provides discussion of historical, scientific, and moral issues, with important information often ignored by believers.

God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School
by Alan Peshkin. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Is it God's Word?
by Joseph Wheless. “An Exposition of the Fables and Mythology of the Bible and the Fallacies of Theology.”

Let There Be Light
by Philip Appleman. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. A book of profound and witty poems tackling religious issues, such as "And Then The Perfect Truth of Hatred."

**The Mind of the Bible-Believer*
by Edmund D. Cohen. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988. Fascinating in-depth examination of the psychological manipulations in biblically based Christianity. Tough reading, but worth it.

Some Mistakes of Moses
by Robert G. Ingersoll. From the author: “Christianity cannot live in peace with any other form of faith. If that religion be true, there is but one savior, one inspired book, and but one little narrow grass-grown path that leads to heaven. Such a religion is necessarily uncompromising, unreasoning, aggressive and insolent. Christianity has held all other creeds and forms in infinite contempt, divided the world into enemies and friends, and verified the awful declaration of its founder -- a declaration that wet with blood the sword he came to bring, and made the horizon of a thousand years lurid with the fagots' flames.” –Robert Green Ingersoll.

Religious Right, Religious Wrong
by Lloyd J. Averill. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989. Good historical review of the rise of fundamentalism as part of conservative politics, usurping the name "Christian." Averill calls it faith turned in upon itself and consequently ungenerous and unlovely in its religion, flawed in its understanding of history, and dangerous in its politics. Positive qualities are also discussed.

Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right

by Sara Diamond. Boston: South End Press, 1989. Primer on the history, ideology, factions, and plans of the Christian Right, It makes clear that religious groups are being deployed by powerful interests to further their political agenda.

Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion, and Morality,

by Steve Allen. "The famous author/comedian/songwriter here fires off a blunderbuss at uncritical biblical literalism. Finding the Bible as a whole riddled with historical, scientific, and moral error, he attacks the Old Testament for portraying God as vengeful and bloodthirsty and the New Testament for assigning most of humanity to eternal damnation in hell. He believes neither approach provides insight into God's true nature. Allen goes on to criticize the religious establishment, especially that of fundamentalism, for ignoring or vilifying the fruits of biblical historical-critical research. Though he claims to find much of the Bible ennobling, the majority of this work is so relentlessly belligerent that one is not surprised to find that he originally planned to publish it posthumously." *—Library Journal*.

The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal

by Paul Kurtz. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986. In-depth analysis of religion as primarily an escape from ordinary life. Examines evidence for Christian beliefs and scriptures.

Why I Am Not a Christian, and other essays on religion and related subjects

by Bertrand Russell. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957.

Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So

by Annie Laurie Gaylor. Madison, WI: Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., 1981. A concise, uniquely informative, easy-to-read book which will challenge your concept of the Bible as "a good book."

History of Religion, Christianity, and the Bible

Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

by Elaine Pagels. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. Traces the history of attitudes toward women's sexuality.

The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts

by Neil Asher Silberman and Israel Finkelstein. "The Bible Unearthed is a balanced, thoughtful, bold reconsideration of the historical period that produced the Hebrew Bible. The headline news in this book is easy to pick out: there is no evidence for the existence of Abraham, or any of the Patriarchs; ditto for Moses and the Exodus; and the same goes for the whole period of Judges and the united monarchy of David and Solomon. In fact, the authors argue that it is impossible to say much of anything about ancient Israel until the seventh century B.C., around the time of the reign of King Josiah. In that period, 'the narrative of the Bible was uniquely suited to further the religious reform and territorial ambitions of Judah.' Yet the authors deny that their arguments should be construed as compromising the Bible's power."

**The Chalice and the Blade*

by Riane Eisler. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Analysis of human cultural evolution, including ancient feminine power, the development of the patriarchy, and the urgent need for fundamental change to a partnership world today.

From Jesus to Christianity: How four generations of visionaries and storytellers created the New Testament and Christian faith,

by L. Michael White. HarperCollins, 2004. A comprehensive historical introduction to the literature of earliest Christianity, with careful attention to the social and cultural world of the early Roman empire in which Christianity emerged.

Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925

by George M. Marsden. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. Academic history of fundamentalism, with details about its relation to other religious trends and theologies.

The Gnostic Gospels

by Elaine Pagels New York: Vintage Books, 1979. Enlightening work on the Gnostics, a group of first-century Christians who had different beliefs and were wiped out by the dominant group of more political Christians. The Gnostic faith was more personal and experiential.

Gospel Fictions

by Randel Helms. "This is a short, simple little book. Anyone who is familiar with the Christian Gospels knows that they vary from each other in various details. This book provides an explanation and in the process explains how they came to be written."

Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness

by James A. Haught. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990. A chronicling of religious atrocities of all types.

Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable Is the Gospel Tradition?

by Robert M. Price. "This informative and gripping books shows us how the Gospel stories were put together in order to satisfy religious craving." – *Ulster Humanist*, April-May 2004.

The Jesus Puzzle. Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?: Challenging the Existence of an Historical Jesus

by Earl Doherty. "The most compelling argument ever published in support of the theory that Jesus never existed as an historical person." –Frank Zindler, editor, *American Atheist Magazine*, Autumn 2000.

The New Testament : A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings

by Bart D. Ehrman.

The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament

by Bart D. Ehrman. "The victors not only write the history, they also reproduce the texts. In a study that explores the close relationship between the social history of early Christianity and the textual tradition of the emerging New Testament, Ehrman examines how early struggles between Christian 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy' affected the transmission of the documents over which, in part, the debates were waged. His thesis is that proto-orthodox scribes of the second and third centuries occasionally altered their sacred texts for polemical reasons--for example, to oppose adoptionists like the Ebionites, who claimed that Christ was a man but not God, or docetists like Marcion, who claimed that he was God but not a man, or Gnostics like the Ptolemaeans, who claimed that he was two beings, one divine and one human. Ehrman's

thorough and incisive analysis makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the social and intellectual history of early Christianity and raises intriguing questions about the relationship of readers to their texts, especially in an age when scribes could transform the documents they reproduced to make them say what they were already thought to mean, effecting thereby the orthodox corruption of Scripture.”

The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity

by John McManners. Oxford University Press, 1990. This richly illustrated book tells the story of Christianity from its origins to the present day. Written by a team scholars, all authorities in their fields, it spans 2000 years to give a comprehensive history of Christianity for the general reader.

Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit

by Garry Wills. “Wills puts Augustine to work against the “structures of deceit” he sees built into today’s Roman Catholic papacy. Wills postulates that the papacy in every era has its own besetting sin. In the medieval period, it was political power; in the Renaissance, money; today, he argues, it is intellectual dishonesty. Because the papacy is incapable of admitting error on doctrinal matters, Wills believes, it forces apologists into mental gymnastics to defend doctrines such as an absolute ban on birth control.” –*Publishers Weekly*.

What Is the Bible?

by Carl Lofmark. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992. Examines the basis of biblical scholarship, explains how the various books of the Bible were compiled and various editions were developed, critiques the Bible as a guide for living, its contradictions, and its mixtures of fact and fiction.

When God Was a Woman

by Merlin Stone. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. Story of the ancient goddess religions and the impact on Judeo-Christian attitudes toward women.

Who Wrote the Gospels?

by Randel McCraw Helms. “The names we associate with the gospel writers are all second century guesses. If this comes as a surprise, welcome to the cutting edge of modern biblical scholarship. According to Helms, the gospels were written to convert or confirm their highly colored arguments of powerful authors, not just transparent windows upon the historical Jesus. If we adjust our focus from the brilliant imaginative pictures to the imaginations that produced them, to the situations out of which they arose, we get to the point of this book - a study of the minds of the authors.”

Children and Religion

Maybe Right, Maybe Wrong: A Guide for Young Thinkers

by Dan Barker. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992. A book for children on morality without religion.

Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological impact of Physical Abuse

by Philip Greven. New York: Random House, 1992.

Teaching Your Children Values

by Linda and Richard Eyer. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. Excellent for parents to proactively teach values to children of various ages, with specific exercises for addressing

topics such as honesty, courage, self-reliance, love, kindness, justice, and others.

**What Do You Really Want for Your Children?*

by Wayne W. Dyer- New York: Avon, 1985. A parenting book that addresses helping children become the people we'd like them to be, instead of simply controlling behavior.

When Children Ask About God

by Harold S. Kushner. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.

Other (nonfundamentalist) Views of Christianity and Spirituality

Christian Evolution: Moving Towards a Global Spirituality

by Ursula Burton and Janice Dolley. Wellingborough, Great Britain: Turnstone Press, 1984. Two laywomen-one a Catholic, the other an Anglican-explain their dilemma within the Church.

The Coming of the Cosmic Christ

by Matthew Fox. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988.

Contemporary American Theologies: A Critical Survey

by Deane William Fenn. New York: The Seabury Press, 1981. Provides readable description of other interpretations of Christianity.

Exploring the Road Less Traveled: A Study Guide for Small Groups

by Alice Howard and Walden Howard. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985 This is one tool available for exploring spiritual values with others - having community without belonging to a church.

The Gospel According to Jesus: A New Translation and Guide to His Essential Teachings for Believers and Unbelievers

by Stephen Mitchell. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. Help for rethinking the words of Jesus. "We live in a civilization based on a twisted compromise of Jesus' teachings, and this very credible account of what Jesus may have actually said is a small but potent antidote." Michael Ventura, L.A. Weekly.

The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith

by Marcus J. Borg. "Borg follows up two of his previous releases about the Bible and Jesus with a volume that could easily have played on those titles, because this highly readable book is essentially about looking at Christianity again for the first time. In that respect, it provides a valuable glimpse into the essence of Christianity for those who have left the faith because they no longer believe its doctrines and those who are trying to remain in the faith while questioning its doctrines. With those people in mind, Borg emphasizes the transformational aspect of Christianity by examining the 'emerging paradigm' that is gradually replacing the belief-centered paradigm of the last several hundred years. The new paradigm, Borg writes, is about loving God and loving what God loves, rather than rigidly adhering to a specific set of beliefs. In exploring this new way of 'being Christian,' Borg offers a middle ground for conservative and liberal Christians, though it's unlikely conservatives will conclude, as he does, that Jesus was not really the Son of God, nor are liberals likely to begin using the term 'born again,' as he advocates. Still, there's much here that both sides can agree on, possibly helping to bring them a step closer to the unity that has eluded them for centuries. As always,

Borg writes with clarity and precision, which should also help the ongoing conversation.” – *Publishers Weekly*.

*****Honest to God***

by John Robinson. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1963. Stunning little book explaining a modern theological approach to Christianity.

****Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium***

by Robert W. Funk. Hodder & Stoughton, 1996. Robert Funk is the founder of the Jesus Seminar, a group of more than two hundred internationally renowned Jesus scholars who meet regularly to assess the authenticity of the words and acts of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. In this book, he embarks on a radical investigation into the transformation of Jesus the social rebel and iconoclast into Jesus the religious icon. He traces how the early Church turned the historical Jesus into Christ the cult figure. Like a detective, Funk reaches through the haze of translation, limited sources, and the overlay of Christian propaganda to recover the flesh-and-blood Jesus, reconstructing the religion of Jesus as distinguished from the religion about Jesus.

****Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Handbook***

by Ram Dass. New York: Bantam Books, 1978.

Living In Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality

by John Shelby Spong. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey

by Brian D. McLaren. “McLaren, pastor and author of *The Church on the Other Side*, proposes that postmodernism is the road to take in order to move on from the current stalemate between conservative evangelical and liberal Christians. His books are part of his activist work to promote ‘innovation, entrepreneurial leadership and a desire to be on the leading edge of ministry.’ Here he has adopted the fictional tale of an earnest, very conservative pastor who has become so burned out in his church life that he is planning to quit the pastorate. Instead, he makes friends with his daughter's science teacher, who leads him to an enthusiastic embracing of postmodernism as applied to the Christian message. In this fictional conversation, McLaren describes this process as a journey of Holy Spirit-guided faith ‘through the winds and currents of change.’ His conservative pastor character comes to accept the Bible as a premodern text that presents its message in story and does not have to conform to our modern expectations. The book's attention-grabbing format is an effective mode of presenting McLaren's ideas.” –*Library Journal*.

Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality

by Matthew Fox. Bear & Company, 1983. “Fox describes people who embrace original blessing as loving and celebrating life. They reverence God's creation, whether it be nature or other human beings. And although they are aware of sin in the world, they don't sit around apologizing for their unworthiness.” Barry Eberling, *National Catholic Reporter*.

The Power of Myth

by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers. New York: Anchor Books, 1988. “Among his many gifts, Joseph Campbell's most impressive was the unique ability to take a contemporary situation, such as the murder and funeral of President John F. Kennedy, and help us understand its impact in the context of ancient mythology. Herein lies the power of *The Power of Myth*, showing how humans are apt to create and live out the themes of mythology.

Based on a six-part PBS television series hosted by Bill Moyers, this classic is especially compelling because of its engaging question-and-answer format, creating an easy, conversational approach to complicated and esoteric topics. For example, when discussing the mythology of heroes, Campbell and Moyers smoothly segue from the Sumerian sky goddess Inanna to Star Wars mercenary-turned-hero, Han Solo. Most impressive is Campbell's encyclopedic knowledge of myths, demonstrated in his ability to recall the details and archetypes of almost any story, from any point and history, and translate it into a lesson for spiritual living in the here and now." --Gail Hudson.

The Psychological Dynamics of Religious Experience

by Andre Godin. Religious Education Press, 1985.

Reading the Bible Again For the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally

by Marcus J. Borg. HarperCollins, 2001. "The title of this book comes from the author's experience of 'unlearning' his literal reading of the Bible from childhood in favor of a 'historical-metaphorical' reading derived from his 35 years of studying the Bible as an academic. Borg provides a highly readable and succinct introduction to biblical criticism, outlining the kinds of cultural, theological and historical lenses through which people read the Bible and explaining how those readings affect their relation to God. He offers a new understanding of scripture that respects both tradition and reality, with a profound concern for authentic faith and how it can be lived today.

Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences

by Abraham H. Maslow. New York: Penguin Books, 1964.

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture

by John Shelby Spong. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991. "Is celibacy the only moral alternative to marriage? Should the widowed be allowed to form intimate relationships without remarrying? Should the church receive homosexuals into its community and support committed gay and lesbian relationships? Should congregations publicly and liturgically witness and affirm divorces? Should the church's moral standards continue to be set by patriarchal males? Should women be consecrated bishops? Bishop Spong proposes a pastoral response based on scripture and history to the changing realities of the modern world. He calls for a moral vision to empower the church with inclusive teaching about equal, loving, nonexploitative relationships."

Resurrection, Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity

by John Shelby Spong. HarperCollins, 1994. Through this radical interpretation of the New Testament, Spong offers a provocative and inspirational re-creation of what happened on that first Easter.

The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth,

by Scott Peck. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978.

The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love

by John Shelby Spong. "In the Sins of Scripture, Bishop John Shelby Spong takes on a thematic exploration of the Bible, carefully analyzing those passages that inform some of our key debates, like the role of women in the church and in society, and homosexuality, to name just two. Beyond that he also looks at scriptures that have helped shape culture and history -- bringing to light the undercurrent of anti-Semitism he finds in the Gospels, for example. The journey is particularly compelling because Bishop Spong believes in and values the good the

Bible has brought to many through the ages. His goal is not to define the Bible itself as something to be set aside, but instead to honor and value what he loves about it while still labeling what he dramatically calls "texts of terror" for what they are."

The Shaking of the Foundations

by Paul Tillich. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948.

A Spirituality Named Compassion

by Matthew Fox. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990.

***Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*

by Bruce Bawer, 1998. Bawer has put into eloquent and decisive language what many mainline Christians and non-Christians have quietly suspected but been unable to verbalize--namely that Fundamentalist Christianity is barely Christian at all. A Baptist theologian says he is "not interested in who Jesus was." Pat Robertson argues the Golden Rule as Jesus's justification that "individual self-interest is being a very real part of the human makeup, and something not necessarily bad or sinful." In page after page, Bawer reveals a so-called Fundamentalist movement that readily displays a blatant disregard for the most salient message of the Gospels: selfless love and service to all.

Toward An Expansive Christian Theology

by Vergilius Ferm. New York: Philosophical Library, 1964.

Toward a New Catholic Church: The Promise of Reform

by James Carroll. "Carroll, a former priest who was in the seminary during the landmark Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, proposes a 'Vatican III,' suggesting it could even be held in a place like Boston, the epicenter of the current (sexual abuse) scandal. He presents five areas of reform dealing with scripture, the ecclesiastical power structure, teachings about Jesus Christ, democracy and institutional repentance. Among other things, Carroll would like to see the church develop a more sophisticated relationship with its scriptures, loosen its power structures to permit more lay involvement, repeal papal infallibility and de-emphasize the traditional Christian teaching that Jesus is the only way to salvation so as to engender greater respect for other religions. . ." --Publishers Weekly.

The Varieties of Religious Experience

by William James. New York: New American Library, 1958.

What the Bible Really Teaches: About Crucifixion, Resurrection, Salvation, the Second Coming, and Eternal Life,

by Keith Ward. Crossroad Publishing, 2004, 2005. Ward sets out what he thinks the Bible actually teaches--about itself and about its many doctrines and beliefs. On these matters, the fundamentalists seem to him--and to most Christians--to have it wrong. The fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is a fairly new one, and one that most Christians don't accept. Professor Ward clearly shows that fundamentalists do not have privileged access to what the Bible really means and illuminates many other interpretations more ancient and widespread than theirs.

Who Needs God

by Harold Kushner. New York: Summit Books, 1989.

The World Treasure of Modern Religious Thought

edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990. Fabulous collection of succinct writings from unbelievers and believers alike concerning spiritual topics and a variety of religions. Great stuff for expanding your thinking about these matters.

**The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Tradition*

Revised and Updated Edition, by Huston Smith. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991. This revised masterpiece explores the essential elements and teachings of the world's predominant faiths, emphasizing the inner experience—rather than external forms of religion. Excellent for expanding one's understanding of commonalities and breaking through the idea that Christians somehow have a monopoly on God.

Alternative Ways of Thinking

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

by Ruth Hurmence Green. "The Bible examined from a freethought perspective. Combined with autobiographical 'The Book of Ruth.'"

***Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*

by Thomas Moore. HarperCollins, 1992. "This book just may help you give up the futile quest for salvation and get down to the possible task of taking care of your soul. A modest, and therefore marvelous, book about the life of the spirit." Sam Keen.

Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas

3d ed., by James L. Adams. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1986. Great book about blocks to creative thinking, including the need to challenge old assumptions.

**The Dancing Wu Li Masters*

by Gary Zukov. New York: Bantam Books, 1984. Fascinating facts from physical science with implications about the elusive nature of reality.

Immortality

by Paul Edwards. "Is there life after death or do we simply cease to exist? Few questions wreak havoc with our deepest held beliefs and strongest emotions more than this one. The answers given over the centuries reach to the very core of who we are and what it means to be human. Cutting through the emotionalism to reach the central issue, renowned scholar Paul Edwards has compiled *Immortality*, a superb group of philosophical selections featuring the work of both classical and contemporary authors who address not only the topic of immortality, but also two of the most fascinating and difficult philosophical problems -- the mind/body problem, and the nature of personal identity. Highlighted are discussion of soul and body, transmigration, materialism, epiphenomenalism, physical research and parapsychology, reincarnation, disembodied existence, and much more." —*Midwest Book Review*.

Philosophy of Humanism

by Corliss Lamont. New York: Continuum, 1990. A standard text in the ongoing debate that swirls around secular humanism, this book offers an enlightening argument for a philosophy that advocates happiness in this lifetime, and not in some mythical world to come.

The Prophet

by Kahlil Gibran. New York: Knopf, 1976.

The Pursuit of Pleasure

by Lionel Tiger. Transaction Publishers, 2000. Pleasure is biologically desirable and good for physical and mental health. Tiger explores this aspect of human nature by focusing on the origins and forms of pleasure. "He explores how sex, food, smell, warmth and other sensual pleasures have yielded advantages and are rooted in our physiological prehistory. . . His major point is that pleasure is positive, desirable, delicious, demanding and worth pursuing." Washing Times.

Robert G. Ingersoll: A Life

by Frank Smith. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993. Rich biography of a major freethinker of the nineteenth century.

Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body—New Paths to Power and Love

by Riane Eisler. Doubleday, 1996. Sacred Pleasure makes the links between sacralizing pain and justifying war, between child abuse and sado-masochism, between patriarchy and the war of the sexes, between the intimate and the political. Only by sacralizing pleasure can new links be forged to peace, equality, and empathy." Gloria Steinem.

Thinking Allowed: Conversations on the Leading Edge of Knowledge

by Jeffrey Mishlove. Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 1992.

World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women About American Life Today and the Ideas Shaping Our Future

by Bill Moyers. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

by Robert M. Pirsig. New York: Bantam Books, 1974.

Science

Abusing Science: The Case Against Creationism,

by Philip Kitcher. "Abusing Science is a manual for intellectual self-defense, the most complete available for presenting the case against Creationist pseudo-science. It is also a lucid exposition of the nature and methods of genuine science. The book begins with a concise introduction to evolutionary theory for non-scientists and closes with a rebuttal of the charge that this theory undermines religious and moral values. It will astonish many readers that this case must still be made in the 1980s, but since it must, Philip Kitcher makes it irresistibly and forcefully."

The Age of the Earth

by G. Brent Dalrymple. "Dalrymple presents the overwhelming evidence for the age of the Earth, Moon, and Solar system in such well documented and critical manner, that it leaves NO room for doubt about the validity of radiometric dating. Contrary to young earth creationist's childish ravings, he builds a case that leaves no avenues for any other conclusion. When creationists say you must have read the 'relevant' literature, they mean the writings of such people as Morris and Hovind. Unfortunately for them the relevant literature is all referenced in Dalrymple's book and he has done an outstanding job at simplifying it for both scientist and layperson. He gives sufficient references that anyone who wishes can pursue any topic on their own."

The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark,

by Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan. "Carl Sagan muses on the current state of scientific thought, which offers him marvelous opportunities to entertain us with his own childhood experiences, the newspaper morgues, UFO stories, and the assorted flotsam and jetsam of pseudoscience. Along the way he debunks alien abduction, faith-healing, and channeling; refutes the arguments that science destroys spirituality, and provides a 'baloney detection kit' for thinking through political, social, religious, and other issues."

**Denying Evolution: Creationism, Scientism, and the Nature of Science*

by Massimo Pigliucci. Sinauer Associates, 2002. "A must read for anyone interested in learning why approximately half of the North American population rejects biological evolution, the dangers engendered by such rejection, and what to do about it. . . It is multifaceted, fascinating, and essential. Everyone involved in science research, science education, and education policy (including politicians) should not only read the work, but encourage others to do likewise." Brian Alters, Quarterly Review of Biology.

Evolution and the Myth of Creationism: A Basic Guide to the Facts in the Evolution Debate

by Tim M. Berra. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. Enlightening and readable information to clarify what the theory of evolution is, and debunks creationism as a science.

Science and Earth History: The Evolution/Creation Controversy

by Arthur N. Strahle. "This book assesses the attempts of fundamentalist Christians to blend science and religion into a coherent view of the universe, called 'creation science,' through a literal reading of the book of Genesis. The author, an emeritus professor of geomorphology at Columbia University, examines evidence from astronomy to zoology, and shows that creation science does not meet the criteria of the scientific enterprise. He concludes that it is a belief system that constitutes a pseudoscience at best, a fraud at worst. His analysis is reasoned, balanced, and fair, but, in the end, devastating. Strongly recommended for public libraries. Robert Paul, Dickinson Coll., Carlisle, Penn." –Library Journal.

Science on Trial: The Case for Evolution

by Douglas J. Futuyma. "It's rare, but not unheard of, that I know by the 50th page of a book that I need to a) read this book again, and b) purchase a copy for my own library. Science on Trial is such a book. A remarkable book presenting arguments in favor of evolution as a counter to the rise of creationism. Written in 1983, Futuyma's arguments are perhaps even more relevant today, in light of recent developments in Kansas, Michigan, and other states. Futuyma's writing style is exceptionally clear and he presents science as it really operates and exposes the gaping factual and philosophical holes in the creationist movement. Obviously no book can ever change the mind of a committed, dogmatic creationist, but this book should be required reading for any school board candidate."

Religion and Politics

The Call to Conversion: Why Faith is Always Personal but Never Private

by Jim Wallis. HarperCollins, 1981, 2005. The reprint of this classic guide to incorporating one's faith in the public arena offers a passionate and personal discourse as how to put one's faith into practice without falling victim to partisan politics. For Wallis, "conversion" is personal, yet it has corporate, societal, and even political implications.

God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It,

by Jim Wallis. HarperCollins, 2005. "Since when did believing in God and having moral values make you pro-war, pro-rich, and pro-Republican? And since when did promoting and

pursuing a progressive social agenda with a concern for economic security, health care, and educational opportunity mean you had to put faith in God aside?" –from the book. "Jim Wallis. . . refuses to allow the religious Right to have a monopoly on morality and spirituality; he also calls for the secular Left to speak to the crucial issues of personal meaning and individual values." Cornel West.

The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right

by Michael Lerner, 2006. Rabbi Lerner provides an extensive survey of American history and ideology, rife with examples of dominant and controlling attributes favored by those on the right (the "right hand of God") who believe in a frightening world replete with evil and ruled by an avenging God. This contrasts with what he considers the loving, kind and generous tendencies of those at the "left hand of God," who instead believe in a compassionate and merciful deity. . . His vision of a country devoid of poverty, homelessness, unemployment and uninsured citizens comes with an actual blueprint, in which Americans rededicate themselves to traditional values of love, kindness, respect and responsibility. Publishers' Weekly.

Emotional Healing

Beyond Grief: A Guide for Recovering from the Death of a Loved One

by Carol Staudacher. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1987.

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis. New York: Harper and Row, 1988. A classic for dealing with sexual abuse, but much of it also applies to other kinds of childhood abuse.

Creating Love: The Next Great Stage of Growth

by John Bradshaw. New York: Bantam Books, 1992. Explains the idea of mystified love, including family and God, and the need to demythologize in order to create genuine love.

The Depression Workbook: A Guide for Living With Depression and Manic Depression

by Mary Ellen Copeland. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1992.

Gift from the Sea

by Anne Morrow Lindbergh. New York: Vintage Books, 1978. Beautiful classic about the necessity for solitude and reflection.

Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy

by J. William Worden. New York: Springer, 1982.

Growing Up Again: Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children

by Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989. Great parenting book, both for inner children and actual children. Stresses dual sets of skills, for nurturance and for structure. Exercises and specific strategies for different ages and stages.

Healing the Child Within: Discovery and Recovery for Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families

by Charles L. Whitfield. Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Health Communications, 1987.

Homecoming. Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child,

by John Bradshaw. New York: Bantam Books, 1990. Insightful primer on healing the inner child. Readable, with many good exercises which take you through stages of infancy and childhood.

I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors

by Aphrodite Matsakis. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1992.

Life Without Fear: Anxiety and Its Cure

by Joseph Wolpe and David Wolpe. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1988.

Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types

by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates. Del Mar, Calif.: Prometheus Nemesis Book Co., 1984.
A personality test based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and discussion of the implications of personality differences.

Rapid Relief from Emotional Distress

by Gary Emery and James Campbell. New York: Rawson Associates, 1986. Very readable and helpful book that emphasizes the freedom gained by accepting situations and then choosing actions.

Self-Esteem

2nd ed., by Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1992. Very impressive treatment of self-esteem issues, including "disarming the critic," handling criticism, "mistakes," and "shoulds." Especially helpful description of our separate views of reality, using the metaphor of television screens in our heads. Also good stuff on judgment. Readable, with practical exercises.

Self-Esteem: A Family Affair

by Jean Illsley Clarke. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

Thoughts and Feelings: The Art of Cognitive Stress Intervention

Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1981. Workbook-style self-help guide with great sections on combating distorted thinking and values clarification, among others.

Transforming Body Image: Learning to Love the Body You Have

by Marcia Germaine Hutchinson. N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1985. Addresses physical self-acceptance with many good visualization exercises; focused on women.

When Anger Hurts: Quietening the Storm Within

by Matthew McKay, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1989. In-depth treatment of anger-its place and its cost, conceptualizing it as a choice, and teaching skills.

Responsibility, Choosing, and Creating

Escape from Freedom

by Erich Fromm. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1941.

Existential Psychotherapy

by Irvin D. Yalom. New York: Basic Books, 1980. Academic but very readable text on the major issues and treatment strategies in an existential approach to therapy,

If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him! The Pilgrimage of Psychotherapy Patients

by Sheldon B. Kopp. New York: Bantam Books, 1972.

"Personal Goals: The Key to Self-Direction in Adulthood," by Marlene Winell. In *Humans as Self-Constructing Living Systems: Putting the Framework to Work*

edited by M. Ford and D. Ford. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1987. An explanation of the importance of personal goals and how they function hierarchically to govern behavior.

Self-Creation

by George Weinberg. New York: Avon, 1978. Well-stated little book that makes the point that you create your own reality by acting on your own ideas.

Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want

by Barbara Sher with Annie Gottlieb. New York: Ballentine, 1979. By far the best book about believing in yourself enough to go for what you really want, primarily in the career area. Inspiring reading with concrete exercises for self-understanding, goal setting, planning, and making real progress toward dreams.

Relationships

The Art of Loving

by Erich Fromm. New York: Harper & Row, 1956. A beautiful classic that explains the need for love of all kinds and a theory of love as an active skill that must be practiced.

Do I Have to Give Up Me to be Loved by You?

by Jordan Paul and Margaret Paul. Minneapolis: CompCare Publishers, 1983. Excellent approach to resolving conflict in relationships, with a specific model for communicating focused on learning rather than self-protecting.

For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots Of Violence

by Alice Miller. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1983.

Making Peace with Your Parents

by Harold Bloomfield. New York: Ballentine Books, 1983.

Messages: The Communications Book

by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1983. Good basic book on communication skills.

***Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Create Your Life, Your Relationships, and Your World in Harmony with Your Values*

by Arun Gandhi and Marshall B. Rosenberg, 2003. This very readable, straightforward book is a powerful antidote to all the bad habits of communication in our culture which cause conflict and pain. The insights are profound and the guidance out of the woods is remarkable. Exercises and anecdotes make the process clear.

Rebuilding When Your Relationship Ends

by Bruce Fisher. San Luis Obispo, Calif.: Impact, 1981. Step-by-step recovery from a relationship loss such as divorce. Many stages and issues parallel recovery from losing God or religion-such as denial, anger, grief, loneliness, selfconcept, trust, responsibility-culminating in a newfound freedom.

"Relationships"

by Marilyn Ferguson. In *Millennium: Glimpses into the 21st Century*

edited by A. Villoldo and K. Dychtwalk. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1981. Describes the conflict between "protection values" and "growth values" in relationships. Says we need to opt for growth and support each other in the search for meaning.

Starting Out Right: Essential Parenting Skills for Your Child's First Seven Years
by Doris Durrell. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1989.

Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child
by Alice Miller. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1984.

Personal Growth and Transformation

Creative Visualization

by Shakti Gawain. Mill Valley, Calif.: Whatever Publishing, 1986. Short, straightforward instructions for visualization.

Guideposts to Meaning: Discovering What Really Matters

by Joseph Fabry. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1988. Straightforward guidance for exploring values and making active choices for creating meaning in life.

Maps to Ecstasy

by Gabrielle Roth. San Rafael, Calif.: New World Library, 1989. Good stuff on the healing potential of movement, using dance rhythms to express emotions and get in touch with the body on a primitive level, goes on to art, writing, other processing. Roth also produces audio tapes with music to accompany the dance rhythms.

The New Three Minute Meditator

by David Harp. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1990. A blend of Eastern ideas and Western lifestyle considerations in which Harp concludes that much can be gained from even three minutes of meditating. Good strategies for those who think they don't have enough time or discipline.

Prisoners of Belief. Exposing and Changing Beliefs that Control Your Life

by Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1991. Provides procedures for revising core assumptions that cause pain. Includes cognitive work and visualization work with the inner child to replace core messages at various stages.

The Seasons of a Man's Life

by Daniel J. Levinson. New York: Knopf, 1978. Classic book on male adult development, tracing life stories and analyzing themes.

The Sky's the Limit

by Wayne Dyer. New York: Pocket Books, 1980. Good section on being present, a condition Dyer calls a muga state. He gives good reasons for "being a good animal" and "being a child," as ways to connect with life.

Transformations: Growth and Change in the Adult Years

by Roger Gould. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

Transforming Childhood: A Process Book for Personal Growth

by Strephton Kaplan-Williams. Berkeley, Calif.: Journey Press, 1988.

Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes

by William Bridges. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1980. Good explanation of the positive potential of life transitions and the stages involved-endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings. Aspects apply well to the work involved with changing belief systems.

Visualization for Change

by Patrick Fanning. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1988. Basic understanding of visualization and guidelines for specific areas of personal change.

Fiction to expand your thinking:

Civilwarland in Bad Decline

by George Saunders.

Dog on the Cross,

short stories by Aaron Gwyn.

Other Worlds, Other Gods

by Mayo Mohs. A sci fi anthology.

Pastoralia

by George Saunders.

Siddhartha,

by Hermann Hesse. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1951. Classic tale about a young Indian man's search for meaning and his discovery of the simplicity of true spirituality. (Incidentally, Hesse was raised as a fundamentalist.)

Stranger in a Strange Land,

by Robert Heinlein, 1961. This classic scifi novel of the 60's has jostled many a reader out of long-held cultural assumptions. The main character comes to earth from Mars and challenges ideas about religion, morality, and love. Some ideas are a bit dated by now but the book is still a great read and gets you questioning.

Reviews

Quotes and excerpts:

"Marlene Winell's *Leaving the Fold* is a wise practical guide for recovery from authoritarian religion and biblical Christianity in particular. I know of no better resource for the former believer who wants to heal the past and reclaim the future. Each chapter is filled with sensible exercises and nuggets of insight that you will want to read and re-read as you clear your mind of thought patterns that no longer fit so that you can live this one precious life on your own terms.

— Valerie Tarico, Ph.D., author of *Trusting Doubt*, writer at Awaypoint.wordpress.com, and founder of WisdomCommons.org

"Dr. Marlene Winell was among the first (if not the first) to address the issue of leaving religion. Her book is not only a classic, it is the main book we recommend to the leaders of Recovering from Religion. There is no stone left unturned in *Leaving the Fold*. If you are dealing with the emotional, psychological or physical effects of leaving religious indoctrination, you should read this book first. Short of being in her office or one of her workshops, there is nothing that will give you more tools for living a faith free life."

— Dr. Darrel W. Ray, author of *Sex and God*, *The God Virus*, and Chairman of the board of Recoveringfromreligion.org

"I heartily recommend Dr. Winell's book, *Leaving the Fold*, which I have read and been recommending for years. Many people born into mainstream fundamentalist churches will benefit from reading this book. Not just disaffected Christians. It is important to understand what healthy patterns are within religion and when they get more and more extreme- till they become outright cultic in nature. Freedom to choose, freedom to think for oneself, the ability to question authority and not just become blindly obedient. That is what true spiritual freedom is all about. Not heavenly brainwashing (like the Moonies, the cult I was in). Not a focus on fear, rather than Love. Read this book! It is especially a

great support for those who have grown up in a controlling religious group and wish to move one with their lives."

— Steven Hassan, M.Ed. LMHC, NCC, author of *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults and Beliefs*, and Director of freedomofmind.com

"Marlene is a writer who understands the inner torment experienced by those who take the journey from all forms of fundamentalism to a place where they look upon their former certainties -- often inherited from parents -- more as of an illness to be recovered from than a way of life they ever would have freely chosen if they knew then what they know now. Marlene's path is one of self-forgiveness and hope offered to those who need a guide to lead them through the process of recovery."

— Frank Schaeffer, author of *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*

"For someone leaving a marriage with an abusive, controlling spouse, there is plenty of help available: books, articles, counseling, and friends. But for someone leaving an abusive and controlling religion, help is scarce, even though the emotional damage and scars can be just as painful and slow to heal as from a divorce. *Leaving the Fold* will help victims of destructive religious groups to get out, get over it, and get on. Dr. Winell's practical advice provides the techniques for healing that any cult victim can use."

— Richard Packham, founder and first president of the Exmormon Foundation

"We love it! . . . Freedom From Religion Foundation is planning to carry your book. You have a firm grasp of the problems and needs of those who are breaking away from the fundamentalist mindset. I wish I had had your book 15 years ago!"

— Dan Barker, author of *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*, and co-director of Freedom From Religion Foundation.

"*Leaving the Fold* is a unique and invaluable guide to the psychological harm done by Christian fundamentalism. Dr. Winell's book is practical,

relevant and altogether real."

— Dr. Edmund Cohen, author of "The Mind of the Bible Believer"

"In a world where dogma and religious doctrine have replaced reason and free thought, many people have been victimized. As victims, people need support and guidance--*Leaving the Fold* provides both. Reflecting on her own experiences, the author presents her book in a thoughtful and readable fashion. For people who have recovered, want to recover, or want to know what others have gone through, *Leaving the Fold* is a must read."

— Tim G. Leedom, Editor of "The Book Your Church Doesn't Want You to Read"

"Winell, daughter of a missionary and now a psychologist, had a genuine "born again" Christian experience and then much later went through another rebirth and found herself apart from that tradition. Although she criticizes fundamentalism for its rigidity, militancy, authority, and strong opposition to modern culture, she focuses on understanding and rebuilding, addressing herself not only to fundamentalists (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) who feel the call but also to those who left and then realize, perhaps years later, that they need to think through the hold that religion still has on their lives. She then addresses issues of healing, reclaiming buried feelings, finding and loving oneself, and growing. Highly recommended for seminary and public libraries."

— Library Journal

\$20.95 | PSYCHOLOGY | SELF HELP

This book by psychologist Marlene Winell provides valuable insights into the dangers of religious indoctrination and outlines what therapists and victims can do to reclaim a healthier human spirit.... Both former believers searching for a new beginning and those just starting to subject their faith to the requirements of simple common sense, if not analytical reason, may find valuable assistance in these pages.

—Steve Allen, author and entertainer

Leaving the Fold is a unique and invaluable guide to the psychological harm done by Christian fundamentalism. Dr. Winell's book is practical, relevant, and altogether real.

—Dr. Edmund Cohen, author of *The Mind of the Bible Believer*

Leaving the Fold is invaluable to those who have gone through the ordeal of religious addiction, abuse, and disillusionment, and who need a recovery plan. I highly recommend this book not only to the wounded, but also urge all pastors to study it carefully and then re-assess their own ministries. Dr. Marlene Winell has made a most important contribution to deal with the most heart-wrenching of experiences.

—Rev. Austin Miles, author of *Don't Call Me Brother* and *Setting the Captives Free*



DR. MARLENE WINELL is a psychologist, writer, and filmmaker in Berkeley, California. Her background includes twenty-eight years of experience in human services, in both community and academic settings. She holds a doctorate in Human Development and Family Studies from Pennsylvania State University. In her psychotherapy and teaching services, Dr. Winell is a specialist in the area of recovering from religious indoctrination, particularly Christian fundamentalism. Other areas of

specialty are communication skills and clinical guided imagery. She has a practice in Berkeley and also consults by telephone. Her "Release and Reclaim" retreats provide group experiences for letting go of dysfunctional religion and building lives of meaning and joy here and now. Marlene has two children and is also involved in promoting global citizenship, primarily through activist films.

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